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| Description of document: | Gabby the Grammar Geek columns from internal National Security Agency (NSA) employee publications, 2012-2014 |
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NATIONAL SECURITY AGENCY
CENTRAL SECURITY SERVICE
FORT GEORGE G. MEADE, MARYLAND 20755-6000

FOIA Case: 79034A
24 August 2017

This responds to your Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request, of 4 September 2014 for "a copy of each Gabby the Grammar Geek column that appeared in internal NSA employee publications since January 1, 2010." As provided in our previous responses, your request has been assigned Case Number 79034. Since processing fees were minimal, no fees were assessed. A copy of your request is enclosed. Your request has been processed under the FOIA and the documents you requested are enclosed (29 documents, 59 pages). Certain information, however, has been deleted from the enclosures.

This Agency is authorized by various statutes to protect certain information concerning its activities. We have determined that such information exists in this document. Accordingly, those portions are exempt from disclosure pursuant to the third exemption of the FOIA, which provides for the withholding of information specifically protected from disclosure by statute. The specific statute applicable in this case is Section 6, Public Law 86-36 (50 U.S. Code 3605).

Since these deletions may be construed as a partial denial of your request, you are hereby advised of this Agency's appeal procedures.

You may appeal this decision. If you decide to appeal, you should do so in the manner outlined below.

- The appeal must be sent via U.S. postal mail, fax, or electronic delivery (e-mail) and addressed to:

  NSA/CSS FOIA/PA Appeal Authority (P132)
  National Security Agency
  9800 Savage Road STE 6932
  Fort George G. Meade, MD 20755-6932

The facsimile number is (443)479-3612.
The appropriate email address to submit an appeal is FOIARSC@nsa.gov.

- Request must be postmarked or delivered electronically no later than 90 calendar days from the date of this letter. Decisions appealed after 90 days will not be addressed.
- Please include the case number provided above.
- Please describe with sufficient detail why you believe the denial was unwarranted.

NSA will endeavor to respond within 20 working days of receiving your appeal, absent any unusual circumstances.

You may also contact our FOIA Public Liaison at foialo@nsa.gov for any further assistance and to discuss any aspect of your request. Additionally, you may contact the Office of Government Information Services (OGIS) at the National Archives and Records Administration to inquire about the FOIA mediation services they offer. The contact information for OGIS is as follows:

Office of Government Information Services
National Archives and Records Administration
8601 Adelphi Rd - OGIS
College Park, MD 20740
ogis@nara.gov
(877)684-6448
(202)741-5770
Fax (202)741-5769

Enclosed is the material you requested. If you need further assistance or would like to discuss any aspect of your request, please do not hesitate to contact me at foialo@nsa.gov or you may call (301)688-6527.

Sincerely,

Paul K
for

JOHN R. CHAPMAN
Chief, FOIA/PA Office
FOIA Public Liaison Officer

Encl(s):
a/s

## (U) The Final Column by Gigi, the Grammar Geek: Take It from I

FROM: (U//~~FOUO~~) [redacted] aka "Gigi" the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 06/06/2013

(b)(3)-P.L. 86-36

*(U//~~FOUO~~) Editor's comment: [redacted] bids her readers farewell with this column. The below article is unclassified in its entirety.*

Dear readers,

When you read this, I will have been retired from the NSA for several days.

One of my favorite tasks during my ten-year employment here has been writing this column. I have appreciated the challenging questions and the positive feedback you provided. Thank you so much, and good luck to my successor.

--"Gigi"

*Dear Grammar Geek,*
*Between "a" and "an" and improper use of "I," I am about to lose it! If I hear another senior leader or GS-14/15 say, "With X and I," or "send it to X and I," I'll croak!*

Dear Kermit,

I am ending my career as Grammar Geek with your statement as it reflects so perfectly my frustration with this particular mistake. It is made so frequently and with such aplomb that I am occasionally tempted to follow suit for fear of being judged illiterate.

Ladies and Gentlemen of all grades and ranks, ***"I"*** is a nominative pronoun and is used as the ***subject*** of a verb; ***"me"*** is the objective form and is used as direct or indirect ***object*** of a verb or the object of a preposition.

Therefore, the above example should be "with X and me" and "send it to X and me."

You will easily avoid this mistake if you just ***think about the sentence without the first noun*** in the compound object. For example, you would not be tempted to say "Mary went to the store with I" or "send it to I," would you?

I think this particular mistake is made by the overly conscientious speaker. Having been taught to be sure to say "Mary and I went to the store" instead of "Mary and me went to the store," the speaker (or writer) reflexively uses that pattern whether a subjective or objective pronoun is needed.

It is a mistake that none of my readers will ever make again.

## (U) The Grammar Geek: Trying Not to Get Hysterical over "Historical," and R-E-S-P-E-C-T

FROM: Gabby, the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 07/10/2013

(U) Editor's note: The below column is unclassified in its entirety.

*Dear Grammar Geek,*

*Why do some people write (and speak) "**an** historical..." instead of "**a** historical..."? Isn't the latter correct? The first letter in "historical" isn't silent, is it?*

*Signed, Gimmee an "H"*

My friend, I want you to know that your question nearly drove me out of my mind! Like you, I often wondered about that very question, and a few years ago I read something that explained why you sometimes see "an historical"--but when I tried to find that explanation to share with you, I had very little luck. Fortunately, I did find a little bit of information, which I hope will clear up the confusion for all of us.

First, here's the general rule, as stated everywhere: Use ***a*** before consonant sounds, and use ***an*** before vowel sounds. It doesn't matter if it's actually a vowel or a consonant at the beginning of the word; the ***sound*** is what matters. These examples should leave no doubt:
An apple
A peach
A happy camper
An honorable man
A unique situation
An x-ray

That was pretty obvious, right? Now it gets a little weird. If you like, just stop reading now and you'll be just fine. But if you really want to know more, here we go.

The practice is historical, and it's waning. It comes down to which syllable of the word is stressed. Using ***an*** was a common variant before words beginning with ***h*** when the first syllable was unstressed. Based on that rule, both ***a historical*** and ***an historical*** were considered perfectly acceptable. However, ***an history*** would be incorrect; only ***a history*** was allowed, since it is stressed on the first syllable. Try saying the words aloud; you'll find that you don't pronounce (aspirate) the ***h*** quite as fully when the first syllable isn't stressed. (But nowadays, that distinction is very slight.)

As for what's acceptable right now, for the most part, we use ***a*** before words that begin with the ***h*** sound, but *historical, hysterical,* sometimes *hotel, heroic and horrific*, and maybe a few other words are accepted with ***an*** before them. Most of the sources I used, including the Oxford English Dictionary, acknowledge and accept ***an*** with a few of these words, but they all prefer the use of ***a.***

Gabby

*Dear Gabby,*

*Is putting "v/r" in the signature line really very respectable?*

*v/r, Kurt E. Yus*

Dear Kurt,

I suspect your question may be tongue-in-cheek, but I'd like to respond anyway. The term (which is actually *very respectfully*, not *very respectably*) was unfamiliar to me as a way of signing off a letter, memo, or email message until I'd worked here for a while, so it sounded strange to me, too. I think it originated in the military, but my sources are skimpy. To answer your question, though, I ask that you follow me through my little thread of logic:

If you send me an email message, unless you prove otherwise, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt: as far as I know, you are both respectful and respectable. If I dig a little more deeply, though, will I find that when you signed off with "sincerely" you weren't really sincere about wanting to help me, or when you thanked me at the end of another message, you weren't actually all that thankful for my advice? I shudder to think what you were really feeling when you signed off with "cordially"--yikes!

Thanks (and I mean that sincerely!) for sticking with me this far. I have no idea if your correspondent is respectable, respectful, or sincere, but I think "v/r" is an acceptable way to close a message.

~~Love,~~
~~Hugs,~~
~~Cordially,~~

Grammatically yours,

Gabby

*(U//[redacted]) SIDtoday is a forum for open communications. The views expressed in articles are those of the person(s) or organization listed in the* ***byline****; they are not necessarily the official, corporate stance of the SIGINT Directorate (messages from SID leadership excluded).*

## (U) Meet the New Grammar Geek, and "Whose" Right?

FROM: (U//~~FOUO~~) [redacted]
aka "Gabby" the Grammar Geek
Run Date: 06/13/2013

(b)(3)-P.L. 86-36

(b)(3) - P.L. 86-36

(U//~~FOUO~~) A note from the editor: After [redacted] aka "Gigi," **retired from NSA**, we found an ideal candidate to take over the Grammar Geek column right under our noses! Assistant SID*today* editor [redacted] will fill the spot. [redacted] describes her credentials this way:

*(U//~~FOUO~~) I came to NSA 30 years ago with a communications degree and a lot of curiosity. I've worked in many different parts of the Agency and done all kinds of work, including writing, editing, liaison work, tech support, project management, and even a little management. Some of my favorite jobs were the ones that included writing--I've worked on SIDtoday, NSADaily, Tech Trend Notes (in Research, now known as The Next Wave), and an IT newsletter. I don't claim to know all the answers, but I promise to find them for you!*

(U) Without further ado, here is [redacted] first column. As is customary with write-in columns, she will henceforth use a pen name: Gabby. The below text is unclassified in its entirety.

*Dear Grammar Geek,*

*There are some in my office who argue that "who's" should be used instead of "whose" when dealing with possession. I have always been under the impression that "who's" is a contraction for "who is" and "whose" dealt only with possession. So who's correct?*

*Sincerely,*
*Whomever*

To whom it may concern,

Ah, an easy one! In many cases, when responding to a question about grammar, the answer begins with "It depends," because there are often exceptions or complicated variations. In this case, though, there's no variation. You are correct.

I'm sure you believe me, but since your officemates will want an explanation, here it is:

***Whose*** is a possessive word meaning "of whom" or "of which." It's used both in questions and statements. For example:

- Whose sandwich is in the refrigerator?
- Whose car is being towed?
- It was an event whose significance was not appreciated until many years later.
- She was a person whose voice carried throughout the office, even when she whispered.

***Who's***, on the other hand, is a contraction of ***who is*** or ***who has***.

- Who's been taking my sandwiches from the refrigerator?
- Who's leaving early today?
- I have a friend who's never traveled west of Maryland.

The distinction is very much like the difference between ***its*** and ***it's***. ***Its*** is possessive; ***it's*** is a contraction for ***it is*** or ***it has***.

- It's my sandwich, so please don't eat it.

- Every country has its traditions.

Getting back to "whose," the rules are simple, but to make them even simpler, just ask yourself:

Can I substitute ***who is*** or ***who has***?

Yes... use ***who's***
No... use ***whose***

(U) Editor's comment: Looking for an old article? Here's a **link to Gigi's (wrapped up) column**. Do YOU have a new question for Gabby--some grammatical dilemma that needs to be resolved? Send in your questions for consideration via the "comments/suggestions about this article" function below right.

## (U) The Grammar Geek: The Effect of Affecting, and Like Wow!

FROM: Gabby, the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 08/09/2013

(U) Editor's note: The below column is unclassified in its entirety.

*Dear Grammar Geek,*

*Please explain the difference between "effect" and "affect." -- Which is which?*

*Dear Gabby,*

*I'm often not sure if I should use "affect" or "effect." Will you please explain their proper usage?*

*-- Which one when?*

Dear Whiches,

The difference between the two words is very simple...*most* of the time. Unfortunately, there are exceptions.

For the most common uses of the words, ***affect*** is the verb, and ***effect*** is the noun. To *affect* something is to influence it, and an *effect* is a result--it happens due to a cause.

His attitude in class *affected* his grade.

The *effect* of the explosion was disastrous.

For these two definitions, these tips may help you to remember which to use:

**A** is for **a**ction word (verb) - **A** for ***affect***.

**E** is for **e**nd result - **E** for ***effect***.

*The book **affected** my outlook on life. The **effect** of reading the book was a new outlook on life.*

**The above explanation is all you really need for the most common uses of the two words.** However, I'd be remiss if I neglected to tell you about the less common meanings of *effect* and *affect*. But remember, for the two words that people usually confuse, you can use the above guide!

***Effect*** as a verb means to bring about, to accomplish. "The new machinery *effected* a decided improvement in the product." People probably get confused about this one, because the meaning is similar to affect, but they are not the same. To say that you effected change means that you brought about change; to say that you affected change means that you influenced it, not necessarily accomplishing the change.

The other meaning of ***affect*** is even less commonly used. In this sense, it's still a verb, but it means *to put on a false show of*--for example, you may *affect* surprise when someone gives you a gift that you

knew they would be giving you. You can also *affect* an accent. Speaking in an artificial way is referred to as *affected* speech, or *affectation*. (Imagine the voice that would go with: "DAHling, we absolutely MUST have you on our yacht before we leave for Europe.")

There are even some other meanings, but they're very obscure, so there's no need to get into them now.

*Dear Grammar Geek,*

*Am I, like, the only person who is, like, so annoyed at the overuse of the word "like"? I mean, like, it seems that, like, the younger generation use this word in, like, every sentence they say. Many adults have, like, taken to using the word in the same way.*

*Annoying isn't it?? Another example is instead of saying "I told David it was time to go and he said he needed a few more minutes", it will come out as this: "I was like 'David, we need to go.' and he was like 'I need just a few more minutes'."*

*When did it become an acceptable form of communicating with one another? Is this really the way "like" is meant to be used?*

*-- Not-Liking-Like*

Dear Like-Minded Soul,

Believe me when I say that I agree with you--it is annoying!--but you may come to regret asking this question! I took your question literally, and did a little research to try to find out exactly when *like* came into being as a *discourse particle, filler, hedge*, and *speech disfluency*. (These are actual terms that etymologists use for the many non-traditional uses of the word *like*. It was also referred to as a *parasite* by one blogger, Anatoly Liberman, *aka the Oxford Etymologist*.)

Not being a member of the younger generation to whom you refer, but having been a member of a previous younger generation, I can recall a similar use of *like* way, way back when I was young. This fact has been documented in pop culture, from Scooby Doo's pal, **Shaggy**, to Frank Zappa's daughter, Moon Unit (everyone's favorite **Valley Girl**). In fact, there was even a tv show in the 1950s called **The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis**, with a character named **Maynard G. Krebs**, a beatnik who never let a sentence go by without using the word *like*. And get a load of this: the same use of *like* can even be found in Robert Louis Stevenson's novel, *Kidnapped*, which was first published in 1886. ("'What's, like, wrong with him?' said she at last.")

Slang words and phrases come and go more rapidly than you can say, "far out and funky," but there's something about this one word that keeps it on the "In" list--at least as it's used in your first example. (I think the second example you gave may be a bit newer, but related.)

Liberman traced a possible origin of *like* to 1741. I won't go into all of his musings, but he eventually proposes that this use of *like* has persisted because it belongs to a branch of linguistics called pragmatics, which deals with the ways people organize their speech. It seems to function as "a marker of uncertainty and resembles 'as it were,' a common parasite in British English. People tend to safeguard themselves from a possible rebuttal and do it instinctively." He adds that successful change passes through three stages: introduction, acceptance, and spread, which could account for the increase in usage in recent years, as well as the other variations such as "I was like, 'let's go,' and he was like, 'OK!'"

As for a conclusion, Liberman didn't have one! I followed him through time and space, and all he offered me at the end was, "I am far from certain that I managed to account for the triumph of the parenthetical like and offered my ideas only to invite discussion." Well, gee, thanks, Anatoly.

I will admit, though, that he did supply food for thought, and a few of the readers' comments on his article were helpful. One commenter, Rusty, didn't place blame on social media (as many have)--he instead insisted, "With the great increase in written but still casual communication via social media, texting, blogging, and so forth, 'like' can be crucial as a tone marker. Throw in a well-placed 'like' and you can go from sounding like a pompous know-it-all to just someone talking."

I don't think Rusty's assertion covers all of your concerns either, but I think that all of this discussion has helped to ease my mind. *Like*--in its many forms and perversions--probably is here to stay, but more importantly, it doesn't mean the demise of the English language.

*Gabby*

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## (U) The Grammar Geek: Capital Concerns, and Taking Umbrage with Homage

FROM: Gabby, the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 09/10/2013

(U) Editor's note: The below column is unclassified in its entirety.

*Dear Grammar Geek,*

*I've tried off and on for months to find some guidance on which words don't get capitalized in the title of something. For example: the words* the, and, an, on *don't get capitalized (unless they're the first word in the title). There must be at least half a dozen incidents a week where I need to know this type of info.*

*Please help. Thanks!*

*-- Bemused Becky*

Dear Becky (with a capital B),

This is one of the many grammar rules that are clear and simple, but get a little fuzzy in more complex situations.

***First, the basic rules:***

- Capitalize all important words in a title.
- Always capitalize the first and last words.

A few examples:

A Streetcar Named Desire
How to Build a Bookshelf
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire
Of Time and the River

Just knowing these two basic rules will get you pretty far. If you remember nothing else, just remember them!

***Next, a clarification:***

The first rule says to capitalize all *important* words? What are the *unimportant* words?

Do not capitalize:

- Articles -- a, an, the
- Coordinating conjunctions -- and, but, or, nor, so
- Prepositions - at, by, for, in, of, on, to* (*Exception: Prepositions of four or more letters -- from, with, about, around, within, etc. -- are often capitalized.*)

***And finally, some finer details:***

- The elements of hyphenated compounds in titles are usually capitalized, but articles, coordinating conjunctions, and prepositions are lowercased.

Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince
Knock-offs and Ready-to-Wear: Frugal Fashion

- The first word following a colon in a title is capitalized.

Jane Austen: A Literary Life

* Since writing this article, I've learned that there are differences of opinion on the capitalization of the word **to**. One reader wrote to tell me the following:

- As the first element of an infinitive, the word **to** IS capitalized.
- As a preposition, the word **to** IS NOT capitalized.

Another wrote in response to the above, saying that capitalizing **to** as part of an infinitive is no longer required, according to the *SIGINT Style and Usage Manual*. My grammar guidance is not only for SIGINT reporting, and I've seen nothing about making this distinction in any other (non-SIGINT) guidance, so I'm keeping it here in the article, but only as a footnote.

*Dear Gabby,*

*Why do I hear people nowadays saying "oh-mazh" on the radio instead of "hom-age"? Are they just trying to be posh, or is that really the correct pronunciation?*

*-- Joe Ordinaire*

Dear Joe,

"Posh" sounds like a diplomatic choice of words. In any dictionary you check, the two equally accepted pronunciations for the word *homage* are *HOM-ij* and *OM-ij*. It appears that *HOM-ij* has been given a slight preference in some cases in American speech in the past, but *OM-ij* seems to be gathering steam. Everywhere I checked, *oh-MAZH* (that is, rhyming with "collage") is either not mentioned at all, or cited as an erroneous pronunciation - or worse, an affectation, made by a speaker who is trying to sound sophisticated - and it's usually blamed on the entertainment industry. It seems to come from it looking like a French word, which it really isn't. (It comes from Middle English, and then from Old French, which wasn't even pronounced the same as modern French.)

Of course, rules and standards of the English language change over time, but for the foreseeable future, no self-respecting speaker, writer, or intelligent person should be pronouncing the word *homage* as "oh-MAZH."

*Gabby*

***PS - A follow-up from Gabby:*** Someone wrote today to say that the people who say "oh-MAZH" are actually saying the word *hommage*, which is a different word from *homage* and therefore not an affectation. I think I can meet him halfway on this point. When I did my research, no dictionaries acknowledged *hommage* as an English word. Today I found one that called it an "English term derived from French." So perhaps *hommage* is on its way into English, and I'll have to accept it. To me, it still sounds like an affectation, but that's just me right now. Ask me again in a few years; maybe we can create a *collage* or a *montage* as an *hommage* to English! (Please don't send a *barrage* of email for my lame attempt at ***badinage***!)

## (U) The Grammar Geek: Bullet Dots and NOT/NOTs

FROM: Gabby, the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 10/10/2013

(U) Editor's note: The below column is unclassified in its entirety, up to the footnotes.

*Dear Grammar Geek,*

*I have had numerous debates about bullet lists, particularly when used in PowerPoint presentations. It was my understanding from my schooling that bullet phrases should not end with a period, ever. However, others have argued that they should exist, particularly if the bullet item is a complete sentence. What is the correct thing to do with regard to the period?*

-- Dot Dash

Dear Dot,

I think you're being a little hard on yourself and others. The most important thing for you to strive for in list-making is consistency. Your list can consist of words, phrases, or sentences, but the format should be the same for each bullet. Periods are needed at the end only if the items are full sentences.

If the list in question is in a PowerPoint presentation, you don't want the slides to be too wordy. Bullets should be *as short as possible*, and *the font should be large enough for everyone in the room to see*. In most cases, full sentences (with periods) are not needed. However, there are times when a sentence is the smartest choice - in which case, every bullet should contain a (short) sentence.*

Since your main interest in asking this question is regarding presentations, I'd like to share a briefing from the first **KINETICS** conference, which was held this past April.** SID*today's* own **5-Minute Expert, Dave**, gave an excellent talk that day, called "**Dodging the Bullet: Powerful Presentations**." Fortunately, our esteemed editor, [redacted], was feeling benevolent and let both of us out of the cramped SID*today* Columnists' Bullpen (which we share with **Jake** and **Zelda**), so that I could hear Dave speak, and he made some great points about bullets and other factors to consider when creating briefing slides.

(b)(3)-P.L. 86-36

*Dear Grammar Geek,*

*In recent weeks, I've seen a flurry of people using the phrase NOT/NOT to mean "not." This is NOT the English I was taught. A double negative was one of the worst mistakes I could make in front of my English teachers. Why has it become so common lately and how can anyone believe that it makes sense? If you read the sentence: This does NOT/NOT mean that such and such is happening today - it means it might be happening today. AND this is often found in high level management emails. How can they be so wrong? And how can we stop them?*

*Thanks Grammar Geek!*

*-- NOT Getting It*

Dear NOT,

I understand your angst - it's truly a bizarre practice! I first noticed it a few years ago, and it confused me. I had to go through a whole conversation in my head: "Not not? Why is this sentence written this way? Are they actually using a double negative for effect, to say that the statement IS true? No, that can't be it. I think it must be for emphasis of the 'not.' Wow, that's weird."

When I first read your note, I laughed and thought, "Now, what kind of advice am I supposed to give on this topic?" I wanted to tell you not to use it ("Do NOT/NOT use it!" Argh!), but before I could do that, I had to check to find out: is there some portion of the Agency population that has to use it, for some reason that I cannot fathom?

I asked around and discovered that there are two types of people here at the Agency:

- **Those who don't see a problem with it** -- They see it as a repeat for clarification, such as writing, "There were ten (10) articles published on SID*today* this week."
- **Those who can't stand it** -- They (we) have never really gotten over that first time they read, "There will NOT/NOT be a staff meeting this week." They are appalled that anyone would do such a thing!

After asking a number of people, all I could come up with were some anecdotal observances and hypotheses on when, where, and why the practice had originated. They include:

- "I've only seen it in message traffic - typically in all caps." [NOT/NOT]
- "I think it started a few years ago with [former high-level person in SID] who always wrote it in lower case." [not/not]
- "I've only seen it in the last 12-18 months."
- "I'm pretty sure it goes back at least 10-15 years."
- "Perhaps it's from the increased military presence here..."
- "I think it came from military radio communications - e.g., 'Do not - Repeat NOT...'"
- "I don't associate it with the military, but maybe government."

I had just about given up on ever knowing the origins of NOT/NOT when I mentioned this topic to Jake, the SIGINT Philosopher (mentioned above) at the water cooler.*** He told me:

"Not/not" is a military parlance thing. It comes from the days of radio chatter. It was hard to hear things on the radio, so if you wanted to be clear that something was "NOT" the case, you said "not" twice. This, like a lot of radio terminology, was then transferred over to text systems in the early days of chat comms, when most comms operators simply typed the way that they had talked on the radio. It stuck around in e-mails - usually, when someone really wants to emphasize that you are "NOT" doing something.

At last I had some background information that made sense! Thanks, Jake!

Fortunately, no one cited any rules stating that anyone *has* to use this method of emphasis, and I was given some guidance from [redacted]:

*It should not be used in formal communications. It should be used on nothing leaving the building - nothing official, except message traffic or operational reports.*

**My advice:** For the sake of clarity, do NOT/NOT/NOT use NOT/NOT at all!

*Gabby*

(b)(3) - P.L. 86-36

**(U) Footnotes**

* (U) I found some excellent bullet-writing tips in a business writing blog (*www.businesswritingblog.com* on the external web). Not only are these tips helpful, they're also a good example of a consistently structured list. (I've modified them a bit for brevity and relevance.) Here they are - ***ten excellent tips for crisp, clear bullet points***:

1. **Emphasize the beginning** of the bullet point, as in this list, when the first few words capture the main idea. That way, readers can skim easily. Use bold type, italics, or underlining for emphasis.

2. **Make bullet points consistent** in structure. For example, make all of them sentences or fragments or questions. However, if you have two sets of bullet points in a document, you don't need to make them consistent with each other - just within themselves.

3. **Punctuate bullets consistently**. Once you've decided on sentences or fragments or questions, punctuate accordingly.

4. **Avoid ending bullet points with semicolons**. Semicolons have been used that way, but the style seems old-fashioned in today's crisp documents.

5. **Avoid making bullet points so long** that they look like paragraphs. Three lines is a reasonable maximum length. For a **briefing** or presentation, keep bullets much shorter than that!

6. **Number bullet points when you have many** - more than five or so. That way your readers can easily track the bullets and refer to them.

7. **Avoid using transition words and phrases** such as "secondly" or "another point." Such linking phrases are unnecessary, and they slow down readers.

8. **Be sure bullet points are related**, especially if you have a lot of them. When you have many, you may need two sets instead of one. For example, if your bullets contain a blend of advantages and opportunities, break them into two lists, with one labeled *Advantages* and the other labeled *Opportunities*.

9. **Avoid bullet points when you want to build rapport** or deal with a sensitive issue. Bullets communicate efficiency rather than warmth.

10. **Lay out bullet points cleanly**. Avoid a variety of fonts or a mix of margins.

** (U) The second **KINETICS** conference will be held on 12 November 2013.

*** (U//[redacted]) *Great Caesar's ghost!* Our editor's name isn't really [redacted] it's [redacted] I may as well also admit that we columnists aren't really kept in a cramped bullpen; The SID*today Columnists' Suite* is actually a very luxurious facility, with topiaries and chocolate fountains. ;-)

(b)(3) - P.L. 86-36

*(U//[redacted]) SIDtoday is a forum for open communications. The views expressed in articles are those of the person(s) or organization listed in the **byline**; they are not necessarily the official, corporate stance of the SIGINT Directorate (messages from SID leadership excluded).*

## (U) The Grammar Geek: What am I Supposed to Do? Also, Another Comma Concern and a Letter to the Editor

FROM: Gabby, the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 03/13/2014

(U) Editor's note: The below column is unclassified up to, but not including, the Letter to the Editor.

**What Am I Supposed to Write?**

***Dear Gabby,***

*I have a question on something that I thought I did correctly, but I see so many others doing differently, that I question my correctness. It regards the word/use of* suppose *and* supposed. *If I was* supposed *to do something and didn't, is it* suppose *or* supposed*? I've always used the "ed" but more and more I see just the "e". Is there a right and wrong way to use this?*

-- Suppos-ed Lee

Dear Lee,

You are correct! Don't waver! I know that feeling: you see it the wrong way a few times and start to wonder, "Have I been mistaken all along?" In this case, the answer is no; you are correct. And for anyone who was saying "I was suppose to..." -- remember this:

In speech, "supposed to" and "suppose to" sound pretty much identical, but they are not the same. The correct phrase for this situation is "supposed to." Grammatically, it's the same as saying:

- She's **required** to get up early every morning.
- He was **ordered** to work late on Tuesday.
- I was **tempted** to stay late at the party last night, but I was **expected** to be at work very early today.

Note the pattern in all of these sentences. Doesn't "supposed" make more sense now?

**That should answer your question.**
**Now I'd like to answer another question that you didn't ask...**

Your question reminded me of another common error, so I'd like to address it here as well. It's the use of the word ***supposably*** when ***supposedly*** is what is meant. "Supposably" is a word, but it's *almost never* the right word.*

***Supposably*** means "conceivably." Grammatically speaking, you would have valid sentences if you say or write:

- It is supposable that there is life on Mars or Jupiter.
- Supposably, there could be life on Mars or Jupiter.

Here, you're saying that it is conceivable that there is life on these other planets, but no one is asserting that it is likely in this conversation.

***Supposedly*** means assumed or alleged to be true. It is sometimes intended with a bit of cynicism or disbelief.

- She supposedly sent the check; I guess it was lost in the mail.
- Supposedly he broke our date because he was sick, but Lorna saw him at a party that night.

- There is supposedly life on other planets, but I'll believe it when I see pictures of little green men.

***Almost always,* supposedly *is the word that you should be saying.***

**Commas in Salutations**

Last month, we had a question about commas in a series. This question is about an entirely different use of the mighty little comma.

***Hello (comma?) Grammar Geek,***

*A grammar-savvy colleague and I were having a lively debate about commas in greetings in e-mail.*

*I argued that "hello" always gets a comma between it and its addressee. "Hello, Dolly!" So, if it's at the top of an e-mail, it should read,*

*Hello, GiGi,*

*(Actually, that second comma should really be a colon or semi-colon, right?)*

*My colleague argued that one pronounces the comma after "hello," but one doesn't write it, because it's over-use of the poor thing and we don't want to wear it out, and besides, it looks funny that way.*

*Who's right?*

-- The Comma Queen

Hello, Comma Queen and Colleague,

You are correct that you should use a comma between the person's name and the greeting. It is a direct address -- i.e., we use commas to show that we are talking to the reader. Some examples:

- Hello, Mary.
- Hi, John.
- Goodbye, Norma Jean.
- Thank you, class, for the beautiful flower arrangement.

To answer your other question, the comma is fine for personal correspondence. A colon would be used for business letters -- never a semi-colon.

I hope you haven't already delivered your "I told you so" to your friend, though, because there are exceptions to this rule.

**First exception:** Don't use a comma with "Dear," in a letter salutation:

- Dear Mr. Smith: -- followed by a colon for business letters
- Dear Mr. Jones, -- followed by a comma for personal letters

I'm actually lying when I call this an exception, because "Dear" isn't a salutation like "Hi" or "Hello." It's a modifier - that is, "Dear Jane" is the same as "lazy cat" -- you would never write "lazy, cat," right? (And it doesn't matter that you don't really think of Jane as dear; it's still a modifier.)

**Second exception**: At times, particularly in email, you may choose (as many do) to leave out the comma before the name when the greeting is "Hi":

- Hi Pat,
- Hi Chris:
- Hi Fran--

This still isn't perfectly proper English, but it's become an accepted way of writing the salutation, at least informally.

With longer greetings, a comma should still be used:

- Good morning, Terry!
- Hello, Sam.

There are, of course, many other uses for commas. I'm sure this isn't the last you'll be reading about them in this column!

*Gabby*

***Footnote:***

* Interestingly, "supposably" is only a word in American English. The Brits wisely refuse to accept it as a word, which makes it easier to say, "Just don't use the word!"

**(U) And finally...a Letter to the Editor:**

(U) Last month I responded to **a question about *Use vs. Utilize***. This feedback message made me laugh, so I thought I'd share it.

(U) An interesting and fun article. I suspect that the preference for UTILIZE vs. USE comes from early education experience.

(U) My high school grammar teacher of most lasting impact was Sister Mary Pedantia who used to (not utilized to) encourage us to "use big words, Students. You don't want to sound as if you come from Schuylkill County." An odd exhortation as that's where we were! However, I believe the good Sister wanted us to sound as if we were from Conshohocken or its environs. She would wax on and on about the joys of teaching in that burg.

(U) I always considered UTILIZE as an affectation. Much as I do the use of 'erb for herb. (There's an H in that word for a purpose; go ask an Ewt about it.) Anyhow, one mistake I rarely run into is people using UTILIZE as a substitute for YOUSE. The latter is most definitely the Schuykill County plural of YOU. YOUS seems to be another variant, but YOUSE know what? there really is an E in it.

-- (U//[redacted]

(b)(3) - P.L. 86-36

*(U//[redacted] Do you have a question for Gabby, the Grammar Geek? Please send it to **DL sidtoday**.*

*(U//[redacted] Looking for older installments of the Grammar Geek column? See **the early columns, written by Gigi**, the original Grammar Geek.*

*(U//[redacted] SIDtoday is a forum for open communications. The views expressed in articles are those of the person(s) or organization listed in the **byline**; they are not necessarily the official, corporate stance of the SIGINT Directorate (messages from SID leadership excluded).*

## (U) The Grammar Geek -- It's Tricky, No Doubt About It

FROM: "Gigi" the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 12/11/2012

(U) The below column is unclassified in its entirety.

Thanks to all the readers who have sent in comments and questions. Questions are selected based on what is assessed as general appeal and just plain whim. Here's one:

*Dear Grammar Geek,*
*Is the word "data" singular or plural? For example: Should I write "**These** data **are**..." or "**This** data **is**..."*

Dear Data-Driven to Distraction,

The answer is the dreaded "it depends."

The noun **data**, which is plural in form, is commonly followed by a plural verb in technical and scientific usage:

The data support the hypothesis.

But what if you're just using the word in general usage?

Here's a quick tip to use to figure out if you need a singular or plural verb: Can you replace the word "data" with the word "information"? If so, use the singular verb:

The data obtained after two months of experimentation **is** now being analyzed.

If you're referring to several distinct bits of information, however, use a plural verb:

The data assembled by six researchers **are** now being compared.

Here's another way to think about it: If you're using "data" to mean ***one*** unit of information, use a singular verb; if you mean ***several*** pieces of information, use a plural one.

*Dear Grammar Geek,*
*Could you discuss "comprise" vs "compose"? There seems to be a recent trend of substituting the phrase "comprised of" for "composed of". My understanding is that the word "comprises" means the same as "is made up of" or "is composed of". My impression is that the incorrect use of "comprise" is so frequent that it is now being accepted as correct usage.*

Dear Composed,

Yes, you are right. The incorrect usage of **comprise** is becoming more acceptable. In fact, I'd venture to say many of our college-educated readers are now scratching their heads and saying, "What? There's a rule about **comprise** and **compose**?"

For those readers, here's the difference: **the whole comprises the parts, not the other way round.** So, when you're using the word **comprise**, start the sentence with the whole shebang.

A full deck **comprises** 52 cards.

You might be tempted to say, "A full deck is comprised of 52 cards," but that would be wrong. You **can** say, "A full deck is **composed of** (made up of) 52 cards."

Here's a way to remember which of these almost identical twin verbs can be used with "of." Just remember compose has an "o" in it, just like "of" -- "composed of."

If you want to ***start*** with the elements that make up the whole, use compose, which means "to make up."

Fifty-two cards **compose** a full deck.

So the next time you read something "is comprised of" something else, you can just chuckle to yourself and say that person did not read this column!

## (U) The Grammar Geek -- It's English, Jim, But Not as We Know It*

FROM: "Gigi" the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 08/10/2012

(U) If you've been working for the government for a while, you are at least bilingual: you speak English and Governmentese. There's even a sub-dialect called NSAese, as some readers pointed out recently. Their questions/comments follow **in bold.** (*The text below is unclassified in its entirety.*)

**Dear Grammar Geek,**
**Thanks for your "Grammar Geek" articles. The latest article (about the missing "to be") reminded me of a developing "pet peeve": the improper use of "to include" as a replacement for "including." A typical example would be "The restaurant provided delicious food, to include a grilled salmon that was out of this world." I suspect that this is also an example of an affectation.**
**Thanks.**

Dear Fellow Foe of "to include,"

You hit a nerve with Gigi on this one. Gigi has only been exposed to Governmentese for nine years and has wondered all nine of them who started this practice. I suspect that this phrase and others like it have wandered into Agency lexicon from our military heritage.

Still I can't help thinking how much better it would sound to say "The restaurant provided delicious food, including a grilled salmon that was out of this world." It just flows. And using "to include" could be interpreted as "not yet, but eventually," which would be all right if the sentence read "The restaurant has plans to include grilled salmon in next year's menu." See the difference.

A good way to determine proper word usage is to pay attention to how things are written in respected books and magazines. In my own very unscientific study, I googled "including" and "to include" in The New Yorker and the New Republic and got no returns on "to include" and

"... and the Nets have a lot going for them, including Thursday's announcement of a big new signing."
( "Finsanity: Jeremy Lin to Houston," The New Yorker, July 17, 2012)

"...which has sovereignty over a string of islands, including Gardner Island."
("Up in the Air," The New Republic, July 12, 2012)

I suppose there will be some who will scoff at my reasoning and still insist on using "to include," but if we make even one convert from your letter, it will be a triumph for better writing at NSA.
**Please comment on the use of "vice" instead of "vice versa" or "versus," or even "in place of." What could a bad habit, or a tawdry occupation, have to do with making a choice between two options?**
**Thanks for your attention.**
Dear Vice Squad Member,

Another kindred soul!

"Versus" has been used in English to mean "against" since it was borrowed from Latin in the 15th Century.

And, yes, "vice" is used for "in place of" in military manuals. But again, you would not find Mr.

**Woodward** or Mr. **Bernstein** using the word vice to mean "against." No, if they're using the word vice, you can be pretty sure somebody is up to no good.
**"[I'd like to see] an article that points out and attempts to correct the many malapropisms that, unfortunately, are so characteristic of the NSA sub-dialect of English, e.g., "soonest" (used instead of "as soon as possible").**

Dear **Henry Higgins**,

Although there are now at least four of us, it would be a losing battle to try to rid the Agency of its jargon.

The use of the word (?) soonest really baffles me. In a place where the preferred writing style seems to be the more words the better, I will never understand why this is the only instance at NSA when brevity becomes expedient. "As soon as possible" is just too long to type out, but the rest of the document can be filled with run-on sentences or tortured logic.

For example, my NSA Google search on soonest came up with the following:

"Please advise soonest as the PDF output significantly increases our turn-around time from initial triage to customer distribution (as opposed to having to do screen shots of each tab)."

Wouldn't this be a better way to conserve a few words?

"Please advise as soon as possible as using the PDF instead of a screen shot significantly increases our customer turn-around time."

Gigi realizes that there are bigger issues at NSA than purging NSASpeak from our communications, but it is Gigi's hope that readers of this column will start a campaign to use English instead of Governmentese in their writing. In other words, use Standard English *vice* Governmentese, *to include* the word *soonest*.

(U) Notes:

* (U) Readers who are sci-fi fans will recognize this as a reference to the lyrics of the song "**Star Trekkin**'" in which Mr Spock says: "It's life, Jim, but not as we know it."

## (U) The Grammar Geek -- I Just Can't "Bring" It Anymore!

FROM: "Gigi" the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 01/11/2013

*(U) The below column is unclassified in its entirety.*

*Dear Grammar Geek,*

*My friends and I often debate the proper usage of "bring" and "take." Some people never seem to take anything anywhere; they bring things coming and going. Can you go over the rules for using these two verbs, please?*

Dear Unidirectional,

Certainly.

The word "bring" denotes movement in the direction of the speaker, while "take" indicates motion away from the speaker. In other words, **you bring things here, and you take things there.**

Please **bring** me a cup of coffee when you come over.
Would you mind **taking** this book to your brother's house the next time you go?

Here's a handy way to remember the distinction between **bring** and **take**. You get "take out" food, not "bring out" food when you order food from a restaurant.

Now this rule applies only when "bring" and "take" are being used when movement is involved. These verbs can also be used in idiomatic expressions, like "take a test" or "bring the house down." In those instances, however, you probably would automatically choose the right verb and wouldn't be tempted to use the wrong one.

*Dear Grammar Geek,*

*What's with the ever-increasing use of apostrophe-s for plural nouns? I'm seeing this more and more frequently, but I thought apostrophe-s was only supposed to connote possession.*

Dear Apostrophe-Axer,

Thankfully I have not seen this trend yet.

Of course, you are correct. The plural of pie is "pies," not "pie's."

The pies tasted delicious.
But: The pie's aroma filled the kitchen.

However, you do use apostrophe-s to form the plural of uncapitalized letters:

Dot your i's and cross your t's.
Mind your p's and q's.

Here's another misuse of 's that you see quite often: using "it's" when "its" is the word needed.

The dog has a bone in its teeth (not it's).

This is not one of those tricky English rules like mass nouns or count nouns. All you have to do is see if you can substitute "it is" when you see "it's." If not, use "its."

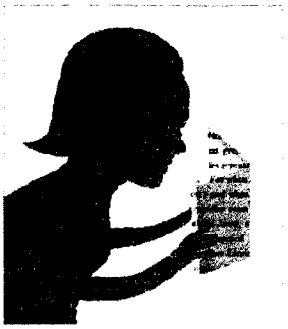
***It's*** easy to remember!

## (U) The Grammar Geek: Apostrophes and Quotation Marks

FROM: Gabby, the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 11/12/2013

(U) Editor's note: The below column is unclassified in its entirety.



This month, in honor of Thanksgiving, I'm hoping to make a lot of people thankful--to me, that is! I'm going to respond to questions about the two most commonly requested topics I've had since taking over as the Grammar Geek. (I've used excerpts in some cases.)

***Apostrophe Catastrophe***

***Dear Gabby,***

*-- I'm really confused about apostrophes. (Or is it apostrophe's?) I see many people using them to make words plural (e.g., CD's, warrior's). Have the rules changed?* -- Curious Cora

*-- I would LOVE to see an article on when to use an apostrophe "s" and when not to. Why do folks insist on doing this to their last name in Christmas cards?! [It should be] the Smiths... not the Smith's! Am I totally off-base?!* -- Ann Alytical

*-- Seems a trend is developing where apostrophes are used willy-nilly. (Examples: "Crab's for sale" and from a sign on I-97: "Granite Outlet's") I've even seen improper use in NSA publications!* -- Mystified Mike

*-- How should one write the possessive form of a capitalized acronym? Would it be correct to write CES's ability or CES' ability?* --Possessive Paul

**Dear Perplexed and Perturbed People,**

There are many uses of apostrophes - and many places where they don't belong - so it can be confusing. I think many people know the rules, but they get careless, which is understandable when one is writing in a hurry. I'll include a full guide in the footnotes*, but I'll address your main concerns now. (By the way, *Mystified Mike*, I was recently driving on I-97 and saw the *Granite Outlet's* sign! Eek!)

**Rule #1** - **DO NOT** use apostrophes for making words plural. (See the guide in the footnotes for the rare exceptions to this rule.) There's no apostrophe in a plural name, unless you're signing that greeting card from "the Smiths' dog" - but then, you'd probably just sign it "Rex" to be more informal.

**Rule #2** - **DO** use apostrophes in contractions. Examples: can't, wasn't, nat'l.

**Rule #3** - **DO** use apostrophes in possessives. This **quick guide** should be helpful:

**Where Does the Apostrophe Go? Does it Get an S?**

| Noun Form | Action | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Singular - doesn't end in "s" | Add **'s** | The boy's dog, Mark's car, anyone's guess |
| Singular - ends in "s" | Add **'s** | The boss's desk, Arkansas's capital |
| Plural - ends in "s" | Add **'** | The bosses' desks, the girls' games, the babies' bibs |
| Plural - doesn't end in "s" | Add **'s** | The children's toys, the women's movement |
| Abbreviation or Acronym (Even when the last letter is "S") | Add **'s** | NSA's workforce, CES's ability, the IRS's reputation |

*See the guide in the footnotes* for more detailed help with apostrophes.*

***Quotation Punctuation Hesitation***

***Dear Gabby,***

*-- How about an article on placement of quotation marks, i.e., inside or outside commas, periods, question marks, exclamation points, and semi-colons?* -- Inside-out Ida

*-- I learned that final punctuation should be placed outside of quotation marks if not part of the quoted material. This does not seem to be the practice. Has it changed, or was I taught improperly?* -- Don't Quote Me

*-- I was taught that the end quote should appear after the ending period. But it is often the case that I want to include computer-related text in quotes. I want to end the sentence with a period but I don't intend for the reader to type a period on the command line. For example:* On the command line, enter "ls -l filename." -- Tech Support

**Dear Quotation Questioners,**

Half of the confusion with quotation marks stems from the fact that the Yanks and the Brits don't do it all the same way. (The other half of the confusion is because--well, it's confusing!)

**Periods and Commas - The American Way:** When a period or comma follows text enclosed in quotation marks, it is placed within the quotation marks, even if the original language quoted was not followed by a period or comma.

- *He smiled and said, "I'm happy for you."*
- *Everyone in the class had already read "The Raven."*

**Periods and Commas - The British Way:** The period or comma goes outside the quoted matter whenever the original text did not include the punctuation.

- *He smiled and said, "I'm happy for you." [same as U.S.]*
- *Everyone in the class had already read "The Raven". [Different from U.S.]*

**Colons and Semicolons:** When a colon or semicolon follows text enclosed in quotation marks, the colon or semicolon is placed outside the quotation marks.

- *They all chimed in to sing "The Star-Spangled Banner": NSA's top leaders, the attending members of the workforce, and all of the intelligence community visitors.*
- *She spoke of her "little cottage in the country"; it was more like a mansion or an estate.*

**Dashes, Question Marks, and Exclamation Points:** These marks are placed inside quotation marks when they punctuate the quoted matter only, but outside when they punctuate the whole sentence.

- "I can't see how --" he started to say.
- Save us from his "mercy"!
- He asked, "When did they leave?"
- When did she tell you, "We're leaving"?

**Making Sense of Technical Terms:** Don't enclose verbatim commands, system messages, file names, and so forth in quotation marks. In some cases a reader may be misled into thinking that the quotation marks or other punctuation are an integral part of what is to be typed. If you must use quotation marks, do not include punctuation inside the quotes. Here are some alternatives that can help to make your text clearer:

- **Highlight** the text with something other than quotation marks (*italics*, **bold**, **color**). However, that can still get confusing when you put punctuation next to it.

- **Rearrange** the words. Putting the phrase in the middle of a sentence, keeping it away from the

period, can help. Combine this tip with the above tip. For example:

Type the **ls -l** command.
Type ***Yes*** at the bottom of the form.
Type **Yes** or **No** in the box.

- Rather than making the command a part of the sentence, **set it apart**, like this:

Execute the following commands:

ls -l
grep apple *.txt
cat fruitlist.txt

- As a desperate measure, you can "**go British**" ** - i.e., write it this way:

When you are prompted, type "ls -l".

I don't recommend this option, but it's better than including punctuation with the command in the quotes.

*Gabby*

**Footnotes**

*** A Detailed Guide to Using Apostrophes (includes the above chart)**

1. Show possession of nouns and indefinite pronouns.

The girl's hat
The boys' fathers

**Chart for Possessives**

| Noun Form | Action | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Singular - doesn't end in "s" | Add **'s** | The boy's dog, Mark's car, anyone's guess |
| Singular - ends in "s" | Add **'s** | The boss's desk, Arkansas's capital |
| Plural - ends in "s" | Add **'** | The bosses' desks, the girls' games, the babies' bibs |
| Plural - doesn't end in "s" | Add **'s** | The children's toys, the women's movement |
| Abbreviation or Acronym (Even when the last letter is "S") | Add **'s** | NSA's workforce, CES's ability, the IRS's reputation |

2. Make plurals of letters, numerals, symbols, abbreviations, and words referred to as words, without the attached meaning. (The **ONLY** case of using apostrophes to make words plural!) *Examples:*

Letters: Cross your t's.
Numerals: 8's (also acceptable without an apostrophe: 8s)
Symbols and Words: Replace all your &'s with and's.
Abbreviations: Two UFO's (also acceptable without: UFOs)

NOTE: Some sources say that you should NOT use an apostrophe to pluralize abbreviations or numerals. I tend to agree at times. My rule of thumb is: Look at it and say it to yourself. If it helps, add the apostrophe. For example, if there are 10 Salami Sandwich Seminars, referring to the "10 **SSS's**" just looks and sounds better than "10 **SSSs**." (It sounds like there's a snake in the room!) On the other hand, **UFOs** looks just fine without the apostrophe. Use your judgment.

3. Mark where a letter or letters were omitted in contractions...

...of two or more words: wasn't, they're, she'd
...of single words: ass'n, dep't, nat'l

4. Mark letters intentionally omitted in order to imitate informal speech.

Singin' in the Rain
Snap 'em up!
(Open any book by **Mark Twain** for more examples.)

Note: Sometimes words are so consistently spelled with an apostrophe that the spelling becomes an accepted variant. Examples: ma'am (from madam), **rock 'n' roll**, nor'easter.

5. Mark the omission of digits in numerals.

Class of '98
Fashion of the '60's (or '60s)

6. (In informal writing) Produce forms of verbs that are made of individually pronounced letters (when needed to avoid confusion).

OK'ed the budget
X'ing out the mistakes
NSA'er (your choice - NSAer is easy enough to read)
49er (not needed here)

** No offense to any of our UK friends or associates. Personally, I like your way better than ours - and I have been known to use your rules in my own informal writing - but don't tell anybody!

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## (U) The Grammar Geek -- Verbize at Your Own Risk

FROM: "Gigi" the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 02/11/2013

(U) The column below is unclassified in its entirety.

*Dear Grammar Geek,*

*Often when someone I know wants to publicize something, he uggests that the project should be "socialized." Here is an example: I socialized the plan with the CAPT and J2O to get buy-in and all esonated well." Even if it's not technically wrong, it sounds so high-alutin' to me.*

*I'm always disappointed to learn there is no party involved. :o*

Dear Plain Speaker,

This is a wonderful cautionary tale of how "big-sounding" words can bfuscate the obvious. Wouldn't it be much clearer to simply say, The Captain and J20 approved the plan"?

Somewhere along the line--maybe when we were studying vocabulary words for our SATs--many of us got the idea that the bigger the words used, the better the writing. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case.

Not that "socialize" isn't an acceptable word. The dictionary I referred to defined "socialize" as:

1. To make social; adjust to or make for cooperative group living
2. To adapt or make conform to the common needs of a social group
3. To subject to governmental ownership and control; nationalize
4. To cause to become socialist; and
5. (vi) To take part in social activity.

...but nowhere did it say "to make known."

I know the trend is to add "ize" to a noun to make a verb. We operationalize and incentivize, and even monetize. But verbs are supposed to be lively little action words, not nouns masquerading as verbs. So, when possible, use (not utilize) the shorter, crisper verb.

*Dear Grammar Geek,*

*Do break-outs for abbreviations always need to be capitalized? It looks like people assume that because the abbreviation is in caps, the full-text wording should be, too. Is that right?*

Dear Concerned Questioner,

You are right that people frequently (and mistakenly) believe that all the words represented by the letters in an abbreviation should be capitalized because the abbreviation itself is written in all-caps. This is not so. The fact that the abbreviation is capitalized actually has no bearing on whether or not the words should be capitalized when spelled out.

Let's look at a few examples:

BBC: This stands for the British Broadcasting Corporation--a single entity and therefore all initial capitals.

What about ATM? It stands for automatic teller machine--not a proper noun, therefore, no need for capitals.

An easy way to remember might be to think of the abbreviation TV. You probably wouldn't even consider using an initial capital on that one.

I have a television--not Television--in my room.

See if that helps you remember.

-- Gigi

*(U) Editor's comment: Have a question for the Grammar Geek? Send it in using the "comments/suggestions about this article" button below right.*

## (U) The Grammar Geek--Who Keeps Changing the Rules?

FROM: "Gigi" the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 04/15/2013

*(U) Editor's comment: After a 1-month hiatus, the Grammar Geek is back! The entire text below is unclassified.*

*Dear Grammar Geek,*

*Growing up I was always taught to put TWO spaces after a period. I have kept this practice through high school, college, the military, and in my professional career. It was not until recently I was told by a co-worker I am VERY wrong and it is a pet-peeve of hers. I looked this up on the internet and found a lot of people (some very educated such as doctors and lawyers) who still insist on two spaces. I am a relatively young, so when I saw articles acknowledging that double spaces were outdated in the 70's, it confused me because I was not even born until the 80's.*

*So, double space or single? ...and is it font specific, as I have been seeing in a few of the articles I read?*

Dear Very Young Person,

I "Googled" this on NSANet and found this entry on https://netinfo.proj.nsa.ic.gov/www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/spaces.html. I think it's a perfect explanation and mentions no particular font.

"In the old days of typewriters using only monospaced fonts in which a period occupied as much horizontal space as any other letter, it was standard to double-space after each one to clearly separate out each sentence from the following one. However, when justified variable-width type is set for printing it has always been standard to use only one space between sentences. Modern computers produce type that is more like print, and most modern styles call for only one space after a period. This is especially important if you are preparing a text for publication which will be laid out from your electronic copy. If you find it difficult to adopt the one-space pattern, when you are finished writing you can do a global search-and-replace to find all double spaces and replace them with single spaces."

*Dear Gigi,*

*Regarding "bring versus take" [see **earlier column**]: It is to be expected, perhaps, that a "Grammar Geek" would not stand on the side of ever-evolving language. I wonder if Gigi has a strong opinion on "hither" and "thither", or even "yon" and "whence"?*

My Lord,

I do--and it is: Don't use any of those words. I think there should be a statute of limitations on the viability of a word. If the last time the word was commonly spoken was in an era that didn't have computers or planes or cars or even indoor plumbing, don't use it.

On the other side of the timeline spectrum, I have a current dis-favorite of a new expression in our ever-evolving language--"went down" as a synonym for "happened." Oh! If I had a dollar for every time I have heard a news anchor solemnly state that such and such "went down" today, I would have enough money for several new grammar books--all of which I would throw at the TV. What is wrong with telling us what happened today instead of telling us what went down--unless, of course, the stock

market is meant.

P.S. Remember the operative word in the question was "opinion."

*Dear Grammar Geek,*

*When should someone use "maybe" vs "may be"? I see people writing a sentence like "The system maybe operational sometime tomorrow" and it looks strange to me.*

*Some clarification?*

Dear Questioner with an Easier Question,

That sentence looks strange to you because it is wrong. "May be" is a verb and "maybe" is an adverb meaning "perhaps." So your sentence should read,

The system may be operational sometime tomorrow.

Here's an example of a sentence with "maybe":

If the system is not operational by then, maybe we should send an Agency-all email.

(U) Have a question for the Grammar Geek? Send it in using the "comments/suggestions about this article" button below right.

*(U//[redacted]) Note: SIDtoday is a forum for open communications. The views expressed in articles are those of the person(s) or organization listed in the* ***byline****; they are not necessarily the official, corporate stance of the SIGINT Directorate (messages from SID leadership excluded).*

## (U) The Grammar Geek--Et Tu, NSAer?

FROM: "Gigi" the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 05/13/2013

*(U) This month our Grammar Geek tackles some problems that arise when incorporating another language--even a dead one like Latin--into our writing. The entire column below is unclassified.*

Perhaps the most frequently asked question I've received since starting this column has been a variation of the following two:
*Dear Gigi,*
*Please explain the proper use of i.e. and e.g.--I see these used interchangeably all the time even though they have two different meanings.*

*Dear Gigi,*
*When using i.e. (that is) and e.g. (for example) is a comma required after the e. and g.? If the statement is in parentheses, does the rule change? (e.g., this is using the comma in a parenthetical statement)*

Dear Discriminating Readers, i.e., my readers,

When contemplating which of these abbreviations to use, ask yourself if the word (or words) following means the one and only thing that could be mentioned or one of many. If it's the one and only, use "i.e." (which stands for "id est"--"that is"). If there are several words that could apply, use "e.g." ("exempli gratia"--"for example"). They are completely different and not interchangeable.

If you haven't already, you can forget the Latin now. My unclassified online competitor, the Grammar Girl, suggests this memory trick: i.e., which begins with i, means "in other words"; e.g., which begins with e, means "example."

Here are some illustrations:

- When I went to Turkey, I was surprised to see a typical American breakfast, i.e., bacon and eggs, on the menu. (Bacon and eggs was the only American breakfast on the menu.)

- When I went to Turkey, I was surprised to see several selections of typical American breakfasts on the menu, e.g., cereal and pancakes. (Cereal and pancakes were two of several American breakfast offerings on the menu.)

You will notice that I automatically use a comma after both abbreviations (and it does not matter if the abbreviation is within a parenthesis or not). This is the preferred approach in American English, although there are apparently some dissenters.

*Dear Grammar Geek,*
*One of my "heroes" of business writing was Malcolm Baldrige Jr, former Secretary of Commerce under President Reagan. He was a stickler for writing clearly and in plain English, and detested bureaucratic jargon and unnecessarily complex writing.*

*One usage I see all the time that I wish people would refrain from is "...per your request..."*

*How about "...as you requested..."?*

Or instead of "...per your email...", *how about "...as stated in your email..."?*

Dear Proponent of Letting the Cat Keep the Purr,

Writing clearly and in plain English is an uphill battle, but I'm glad you are in the fight.

*Per* is Latin and is often used to mean "by the," as in "28 miles per gallon," or "according to," as in your example.

"Per gallon" and "per mile" are well accepted now and can be seen in many car ads. In fact, seeing "MBTG" instead of "MPG" might cause a different kind of sticker shock. However, I agree that "as you requested" sounds just as smart as "per your request" ... and a lot less pretentious.

So, dear readers, think it over II or III times before using Latin, and carpe diem!

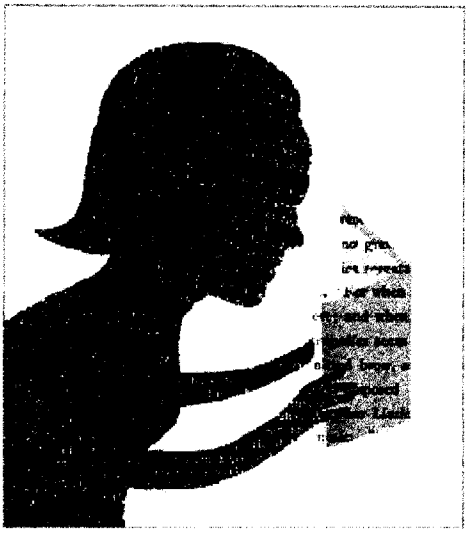
*(U//[redacted]) Note: SIDtoday is a forum for open communications. The views expressed in articles are those of the person(s) or organization listed in the* ***byline****; they are not necessarily the official, corporate stance of the SIGINT Directorate (messages from SID leadership excluded).*

## (U) The Grammar Geek: Use vs. Utilize and the Oxford Comma

FROM: Gabby, the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 02/12/2014

(U) Editor's note: The below column is unclassified in its entirety.



**Use or Utilize?**

***Dear Grammar Geek,***

*What are your thoughts on the use of the words "utilized" and "utilizing"? Whenever I change these words to "used" and "uses," the sentences seem "stronger." Is this a personal bias or am I on to something?*

-- Use It or Lose It?

Dear Use It or Lose It,

Thank you for bringing up this topic. We've all seen the advice from management* and promotion boards, as well as in writing guides. They all tell us:

**Don't say "utilize" when "use" will work.**

I agree with this statement, but I do think it raises the question: When *won't* "use" work? In what context would one correctly use "utilize"?

For all intents and purposes,** that answer is: **never!** Even those who claim that there is a distinction admit that it's slight. Their explanation: You ***use*** a tool for its intended purpose; you ***utilize*** it for a different purpose. For example: You would ***use*** a hammer to pound nails, but you'd ***utilize*** a hammer to crack walnuts. But I don't buy it!

That distinction is not widely accepted, and I see it as unreasonably strict. Since when is it wrong to say, "I used my hammer to crack the walnuts"? There's *nothing* wrong with that sentence! So the argument falls apart, and instead of the guidance above, you can just remember this simpler rule:

**Don't say "utilize." "Use" *will* work.**

**The Case of the Vanishing Comma**

***Dear Gabby,***

*When I was younger (way too long ago), a list of items in a sentence always had a comma after each entry but the last. Lately I've noticed that the second-to-last entry no longer seems to have that comma, which to me alters the meaning of the sentence. For example, one used to write:*

Apples, oranges, pears, and peaches are good for you.

*Now, people write:*

Apples, oranges, pears and peaches are good for you.

*"Pears" lost its comma. When I read this, my mind wants to group pears and peaches as one item in the list, though that's not how it's intended in this case. There's a natural pause that goes along with a comma when the sentence is spoken, so as to better understand the items in the list.*

*Another example:*

Capone, Bonnie and Clyde, and Dillinger were all gangsters.

*Bonnie and Clyde are grouped together, so they don't get a separating comma. But if it were written as:*

Capone, Bonnie and Clyde and Dillinger were all gangsters.

*It would look ugly as well as lose the proper grouping.*

*So what happened to that vanishing comma? Why is it no longer used, such that it can cause confusion when reading or speaking the sentence?*

-- Commatose

Dear Commatose,

Keep the faith! That comma is not vanishing! I'm so sorry to hear of--but totally understand--your distress about this topic! You want to set things right. Like **Horton the elephant** trying to tell the world about the tiny Whos in Whoville, you just want the world to know that these commas still exist -- and you are correct!

That last little comma that you're missing so terribly is actually known by a few different names. It's called the serial comma, the Oxford comma, and the Harvard comma.*** I'll call it the Oxford comma here because it's the term I hear most often, but feel free to refer to it by any one of those terms. Most writers and editors (including this one) have pretty strong feelings about it, but I will attempt to be unbiased and keep my explanation simple.

**1. Is there a rule that all lists in a sentence MUST have the last comma?**

No, there is not.

**2. How do you know whether to include it?**

If you are an Oxford comma "believer," your answer to that question is: Always include the comma. Your writing will be clearer and more consistent.

If you're not in the Oxford camp, the answer to that question is: Read the sentence with and without the comma. Does it make sense both ways? If you leave out the comma, is there potential for confusion? You have to decide if it makes sense.

Here are a couple of examples:

**I had a sandwich, chips and a soda for lunch.**

It's unlikely that anyone would get confused by that sentence, so why waste a keystroke, the space on the page, or the ink? This sentence is clear without the comma. Personally, I still feel the need for it, for the sake of consistency, but that's why I'm on the Oxford team.

**I'd like to dedicate this book to my parents, Oprah Winfrey and God.**

Your parents are Oprah Winfrey and God? Cool! Oh, they're not? A comma would have helped in this case.

Commatose, you've also supplied some good examples in your question, so I won't belabor the point.

**3. What if my boss makes me use it? Can't I point out to him/her that it's not required?**

Well, you can try -- good luck with that! But seriously, it's very common for an editor or writing team to have a policy about this use of the comma. Often, the decision is to keep it for consistency, since deciding not to ever use it would be sure to cause confusion, and opinions will differ on when it's needed.

Sometimes you just can't anticipate how something you've written will be read -- or misread, even with perfectly written sentences, but the Oxford comma can help you to avoid a misunderstanding. If you decide to live life on the edge and treat commas on a case-by-case basis, just be sure you've made yourself clear. Read those sentences like someone who has no knowledge of what you're writing -- or better yet, have someone else read it for you -- especially if it's important. (That's good advice for all your writing, actually.)

*Gabby*

**Footnotes:**

* Here's an old SID*today* article with an excellent example of **management guidance against using "utilize."** At least he kept the memo short!

** Did you notice the phrase I used? I wrote: "***For all intents and purposes***..." That is the correct wording! If you have been saying, "for all intensive purposes" -- stop! It's not right! I may cover this in a future column; if you have specific questions about it or other expressions you aren't sure about, please write and ask!

*** The term "Oxford comma" is so-called because Oxford University Press style guidelines require it, and similarly, the name "Harvard comma" came from it being the house style at Harvard University Press.

(U//[redacted]) Do you have a question for Gabby, the Grammar Geek? Please send it to **DL sidtoday**.

(U//[redacted]) Looking for older installments of the Grammar Geek column? See **the early columns, written by Gigi**, the original Grammar Geek.

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## (U) The Grammar Geek: Neither/Nor and Disrespect

FROM: Gabby, the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 01/10/2014

(U) Editor's note: The below column is unclassified in its entirety.

This month's questions reminded me not to get too smug with my responses; I thought I knew the answers to both questions but wanted to verify--and it's a good thing I did! I learned something new in both cases. I guess that's a good way to start the year, learning something new!

**Neither This Nor That...*Nor That?***

***Dear Grammar Geek,***

*When using the pattern, "neither...nor...," can you only have two [options]? Can you have three? For instance, can I say, "Neither he, she, nor I want go to the movies"? Or is it only grammatically correct to have two: "Neither he nor she wants to go to the movies"?*

--Neither Sure Nor Certain

Dear Neither,

**Either/or** refers to a choice between **two** possibilities, but **neither/nor** *can* actually be about **two or more** options. This was confusing to me, but I got some good advice from a co-worker: he said to think of it this way:

"**or**" consists of **two** letters ..... **either/or must have only two options**

"**nor**" consists of **more than two** letters ..... **neither/nor allows more than two options**

Both of these examples are correct and should help to illustrate:

**He neither smiled, spoke, nor looked at me.**

**I like neither hot dogs nor mustard nor ketchup.**

There's no real logic to this; it's just another quirk of the English language. *Wiktionary* explains it this way:

*Neither is used to mean none of two or more.* Although some suggest that using the word neither with more than two items is incorrect, it has been commonly used to refer to more than two subjects since the 17th century. The more modern usage does prefer *none* with more than two things.

Whew!

I'll supply a few more helpful hints about **neither/nor** below. *

**Disrespectfully Yours?**

***Dear Grammar Geek,***

*One thing that's bothered me greatly over the past few years is the use of the word "disrespect." When I was growing up, I always heard "disrespect" used as a noun, but never a verb. More and more frequently, I hear people using it as a verb, and it makes me cringe every time.*

*Are sentences such as the following actually acceptable?*

*(U) "I'm unhappy with you, because you've been disrespecting me."*

--Diss N. Dat

Dear Diss,

I agreed with you and thought the use of disrespect as a verb was a relatively new fad. It's just street slang, right? Wrong! According to the **Oxford English Dictionary**, not only is it a verb, but its use as a verb goes back to the seventeenth century. Keep in mind that it went out of fashion years ago, so you may want to continue to avoid its use if you're not a part of the hip-hop crowd, but it's a valid word, and I did see one use that was definitely not hip-hop: "Don't disrespect the flag by dropping it."

To summarize, the current use of disrespect as a verb is out of fashion, but it is a legitimate verb, and now, just like the fashion cycles of everything from **leather jackets** to **leisure suits**,** it has reappeared and is making its way back into common usage.

As I sign off, I'm chuckling to myself that both of this month's questions led to answers that involved something from the 17th century. I didn't plan it that way, but it's appropriate, because most of today's column was very **enlightening** for me!

*Gabby*

**Footnotes:**

*** A Little More on Neither/Nor:**

**1. Nor** doesn't necessarily have to appear in a sentence with the word **neither**. **Nor** can start a sentence--but beware! You have to use it correctly, or you'll just sound foolish. Don't just say, "Alice nor Bob likes to get up in the morning." You'll have everyone scratching their heads. In that case, the correct sentence would be: "Neither Alice nor Bob likes to get up in the morning." Here is an example of how to use nor at the beginning of a sentence:

I do not like noodles. Nor do I like rice.

Although I can't imagine anyone not liking noodles or rice, that pair of sentences is grammatically correct.

**2. Singular or Plural** -- When using either/or and neither/nor, note the following rules:

- If both elements are singular, the verb is singular too.
  - Either the father or the mother has to attend the meeting. (*father* and *mother* are singular; so verb *has* is singular too)
  - Neither Leila nor Nancy is going to write the report. (*Leila* and *Nancy* are singular; so the verb *is* is singular too)
- However, if one of the elements is plural, use a plural verb.
  - Either Bob or the girls are going to prepare dinner tonight. (*the girls* is plural; so the verb *are* is plural too)
  - Neither the teacher nor the students were in the classroom this morning. (*the students* is plural; so the verb *were* is plural too)
- Some sources say--for singular/plural combinations--to use the verb that goes with whichever element is last.
  - Either Bob or the girls are going to prepare dinner tonight.
  - Either the girls or Bob is going to prepare dinner tonight.

Between the second and third bullet above, I prefer the second, but you can justify either way. When in doubt, I always find a way to reword so that there can be no confusion. I'd say "Either Bob or the girls are going to prepare dinner tonight." That way, followers of both rule are satisfied.

** Hopefully leisure suits are lost forever and will **not** find their way back!

**One More Note:**

In **last month's Grammar Geek column**, I answered a question about the past tense of **forgo** (it's **forwent** -- but read the column for a better explanation), and one reader wrote to ask, "Does this call for another article explaining the difference between 'forgo' and 'forego'?" Well, I guess now that you mention it, it does, so here you go:

Both words are verbs, with the same pattern for past tenses (same as *go, went, gone*), but the definitions are *usually* different:

**Forgo** means: 1. To let pass, to leave alone; 2. To do without, to abandon; 3. To refrain from, to abstain from, to pass up, to withgo.

*The only way to avoid shame is to **forgo** acting shamefully.*

**Forego** means: 1. To precede, to go before.

*The **foregoing** discussion led to the heated argument you witnessed.*

*However*, **forego** is *also an alternative spelling* for **forgo**, so sometimes it means the same thing as forgo.

Aren't you glad someone asked?

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## (U) The Grammar Geek: A Whole Lot of Questions and Answers

FROM: Gabby, the Grammar Geek

(b)(3) - P.L. 86-36

Run Dates: 12/10/2013 , 12/12/2013

*(U//~~FOUO~~) Reposting today because this article was originally published on a* [redacted]

(U) Editor's note: The below column is unclassified in its entirety.

**This month, I was busy with some end-of-year work, shopping, and festivities, so I decided to answer all the easy questions! I was able to squeeze in quite a few questions--I hope you find at least a couple of them helpful!**

**Discrete or Discreet?**

***Dear Gabby,***

*I would like to ask you to go over the difference between "discrete" and "discreet", a pair of homophones frequently--although I am sure unintentionally--misused by SIGINT reporters. I have tried to be discreet (circumspect) and address these misuses discretely (separately), however the breadth of misuse across SIGINT reporting elements has overwhelmed me. Please help analysts understand the difference between these two words. --A Discreet Reader*

**Dear Discreet Reader,**

Those darn homophones! (Note to anyone who is unsure: *homophones* are words that are pronounced alike but differ in spelling, meaning, and/or origin.) You did a good job of explaining the differences, so I'll just add a little bit:

*Discreet* describes showing reserve, prudence, or cautiousness in one's behavior or speech. *Discrete*, on the other hand, means distinct, separate, or unrelated. A quick and easy way to remember the difference is to see that in ***discrete***, unlike ***discreet***, the ***e's*** are separated--so they're "distinct, separate" e's--just like the definition.

By the way, the noun form of discreet is discretion, which most people use correctly, but it doesn't help at all with remembering which is which! The noun form of discrete is discreteness.

**For...What?**

***Dear Gabby,***

*What's the past tense of forgo? Is it forgone? Forwent? I'm serious, I've wanted to use that word for a while, but I just avoid it at all costs. --Forlorn Frannie*

**Dear Frannie,**

I know it sounds weird, but the past tense is *forwent*. (It's like go/went/gone: forgo/forwent/forgone.) I think pretty much everyone avoids using *forwent*, because they aren't sure if it's correct. People are a lot more familiar with the word *forgone*, which sounds so much better: *It was a forgone conclusion.* If I wanted to say something like, "We forwent the wedding and went straight to the reception," I would find a way to use other words, for example: "We passed on the wedding..." or "We went straight to the reception, having forgone the wedding." My advice: If *forwent* is the word you need, use it proudly, knowing that it really is a word--but if you just don't feel like getting questions, being "corrected," or getting into long discussions about it, just continue to avoid it; with a little thought and creativity, you can *forgo* using *forwent*.

**Pronouncing Plurals**

***Dear Gabby,***

*What are the rules for pluralization of words that end in 's'? A pet peeve of mine is when I hear people pronounce 'processes' as if the last syllable rhymed with 'parentheses.' --Stressed by the 'S'*

**Dear Stressed,**

As far as rules go--well, you know how English is. There are rules for all kinds of spellings and pronunciations. But for the specific word you mention--processes--the normal pronunciation is your way: prah-sess-iz. I'm sure you're also aware that the words theses, crises, parentheses, and hypotheses are pronounced with that "seez" ending. Note that all of the singular versions of those words end in "sis" and are pronounced "sis." The plural is a spelling change ("ses") and a corresponding pronunciation change ("seez"). There seem to be people who want to carry that sound over into other words, like processes--I guess it sounds fancier and they like sounding fancy. I did find a dictionary that acknowledged that pronunciation as an alternative, so, since English is a living language, it's quite possible that we'll have to accept it in the not-too-distant future--but for now, everybody, please, pronounce it prah-sess-siz, not prah-sess-seez!

**Do You Resemble This Remark?**

***Dear Grammar Geek,***

*Is there a difference between "resemble" and "resent" when used in the context, "I resemble/resent that remark." --Not Clear*

**Dear Not Clear,**

I'm a little unclear myself, on how to respond to this question. I'm thinking that you're pulling my leg, but just in case you're not, I guess I'm going to have to give you a clear answer.

The phrase, "I resent that remark," means exactly what it says. The person speaking feels displeasure or indignation about a statement that was made. If someone says, "I resemble that remark," they are saying it in jest, usually in a self-deprecating manner. For example, if I comment, "There were a lot of rude people at that meeting," my co-worker who was at the same meeting may quip, "I resemble that remark!" It sounds like he's about to say "resent" because he's insulted, then "resemble" makes it kind of funny.

This particular quote is sometimes (but not always) attributed to **Groucho Marx**, who usually made self-deprecating, ironic, sardonic, or otherwise humorous statements like the following:

- My mother loved children--she would have given anything if I had been one.
- I never forget a face, but in your case I'll make an exception.
- She's so in love with me, she doesn't know anything. That's why she's in love with me.
- Outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend. Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read.

**The Avenging Editor?**

**Dear Grammar Geek,**

Based on (Gigi's) article "**Yinz Talk Funny**," do we have permission to take a red Sharpie to official Agency posters that say things like, "Do you have something that needs moved?", as I saw the other day? (Please say yes!) --Ed Itor

**Dear Ed,**

Now, I know you were just kidding around, but I feel the need to respond with a NO! I'm sorry. I wish I could say yes.

**80% Rule**

**Dear Grammar Geek,**

So have a question or maybe a suggested topic for the future. So why the big fuss on grammar when I am told time after time in operations/programs that we can't afford the 100% solution but can live with the 80% solution because that is all the money (i.e. time) to spend on it. So why in grammer do we have to be 100% correct..why can't we apply the 80% rule and have 80% of the grammer correct and 80% of the words spelled correctly. We would really all understand the message we are trying to get across with only 80% of the grammer correct? If i didn't capitalize the letter (like in this sentence) would you still understand it? If I use the wrong tense would you still understand the message (did you get my question even though the grammer was wrong?) Would maybe be an interesting concept to see how much time we would save (i.e money) if we did that. I know for fact I am spending a ton of time correctly such minor things in ACE reports right now. --Tired of all this editing

**Dear Tired,**

Whew! I'm tired too--reading your note took a lot of effort! To be honest, I did get your point, but it was pretty confusing. And to be even more honest, I'd say that you would be lucky if this note made it to 20% accuracy. My problem with what you're proposing is not that I think we have to be 100% accurate, but that shooting for 80% reduces the goal to quantity rather than quality. Strive to get your point across clearly; knowing the rules of grammar (not grammer--sorry, that's **the guy who played Frasier on TV**) will help you to be clear and accurate. Strive to **develop better habits**, so that it really isn't any more work to write correctly than to write poorly. If you make a few mistakes, most people won't notice or care, but if you make certain mistakes that confuse the reader, you could cause horrible misunderstandings--and around here, maybe even international incidents!

*Gabby*

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## (U) The Grammar Geek: Don't Say THAT!

FROM: Gabby, the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 04/10/2014

(U) Editor's note: The below column is unclassified in its entirety.

Gabby's note: Here are two questions that don't seem to have much in common, but in fact they do!

**Did You Really Mean to Say That?**

***Dear Grammar Geek,***

I've recently heard a few of my colleagues using common phrases incorrectly. For example, "For all intensive purposes..." or "That's how it is, now and days." How can I be sure I'm using the right phrase and not just what I think I heard?

-- Mind-Bottled

***Dear Gabby,***

Could you enlighten me on the origin of the ridiculous expression: "If he thinks I'm going to do his work for him, he's got another THING coming!" Did it once mean something?

-- Seeking Sense

Dear *Mind-Bottled* and *Seeking Sense*,

First, I'd like to say that I've never heard "now and days" used in place of "nowadays" -- that's pretty amusing! I also have commented on a few others recently -- "supposably" in March and "for all intensive purposes" in February -- but now I'm going to tackle a bunch of them at once. Thank you both for prompting me to do this; hopefully, we'll be able to help a lot of people who aren't aware.

Many of the phrases that are mistakenly used sound funny when you know what they should be, but quite a few of the correct phrases sound pretty strange as well -- so how is a person to know? The only way to be sure is to be proactive, so I'm going to supply some resources here.

But first, I'd like to share my big surprise of the month: "He's got another thing coming" is one of those incorrect phrases! I had always figured it had some kind of origin that would make sense once I read about the context, but that's not it at all! The full expression actually is:

If he thinks [whatever], he's got another THINK coming!

In other words: *Think again! You're mistaken!* I think it sounds very strange, but it does make more sense that way.

I'm going to provide you with some homework: See this article's appendix for a list of external web sites. When you get a chance, read through them and familiarize yourself with the correct phrases. I can't guarantee that you'll have all the answers now, but at least you'll have improved your odds. My list of resources won't contain every incorrect phrase ever uttered; I encourage you to seek more sources of information on your own--and please share the interesting and/or surprising ones with me!

Before checking the appendix, though, here are some of **my favorite incorrect phrases** -- with their corrections, of course:

| What Many People Say | The Correct Word/Phrase | Explanation, Example, |
|---|---|---|

| | | Comment |
|---|---|---|
| Supposably | Supposedly | "Supposably" is a word, but it's almost never what you mean. See **March Grammar Geek**. |
| For all intensive purposes | For all intents and purposes | Think about it; it makes more sense. See footnore in **February Grammar Geek**. |
| ...another *thing* coming. | ...another *think* coming. | It means, "You're wrong, so think again!" |
| Should of<br>Would of<br>Could of | Should ***have*** or should've<br>Would ***have*** or would've<br>Could ***have*** or could've | This is a huge pet peeve of mine. I'm really not a grammar snob, but this error makes me crazy! |
| It's a doggy-dog world. | It's a dog-eat-dog world. | This conveys that people are merciless and will do anything to their own kind to get to the top. * |
| Mute point | Moot point | "Mute" means "incapable of speech." "Moot" means "debatable, doubtful, or irrelevant." |
| Tow the line | Toe the line | The origins of this idiom come from the military. It is thought to mean the practice of arranging one's feet on a line for inspection. So, literally, to put one's toe on a line to be examined for a certain standard -- NOT dragging a line. |
| Peak/peek my curiosity | Pique my curiosity | "Pique" means "stimulate." |
| Nip in the butt | Nip in the bud | It implies cutting a new bud (off a plant), not biting someone in their behind. |
| Irregardless | Regardless or Irrespective | I've heard rumors that "irregardless" has been mistakenly used so many times that it now appears in some dictionaries. I don't care about that; it's still wrong! Don't use it! |
| Literally (when you're speaking in hyperbole or being figurative) | *Omit the word from the statement, unless you mean exactly what you're saying.* | Feel free to exaggerate all you want; just don't say, "There were *literally* a million flowers in front of the house," unless you counted a million. I feel as strongly about this error as "should/would/could of" -- Ugh! |
| Ironic (when something is funny, coincidental, weird, or interesting) | Funny, coincidental, weird, or interesting | "Ironic" has a much more limited meaning than many people seem to think. In a nutshell, irony is seen when the result of |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | something you do is the opposite of what was intended. ** |
| Expresso | Espresso | That hot drink you want to order is ***espresso***. There's no such drink as "expresso." |
| Hunger pains | Hunger pangs | "Pang" means a sudden spasm of pain. Saying "hunger pains" works, but it's much less descriptive. |
| Momento | Memento | "Momento" isn't a word; ***memento*** is a keepsake. |
| Could care less | Couldn't care less | Do you care or not? If you want to make the point that you don't care, saying that you could care less says exactly the opposite. *** |
| The spitting image | The spit and image | One source informed me that the original phrase, "spit and image," may come from the Bible, where God made Adam out of "spit and mud" in order to make him in his own image. God didn't spit on him, as the misstated idiom seems to suggest. Another source gave me this information, which seems like a pretty good explanation: "Spit and image" is a shortened form of "Spirit and image," with its origin possibly in Ireland.<br>MORE on "Spitting Image":<br>Hold everything! I've heard from enough people now to admit that I may have erred-- "spitting image" is now at least as acceptable as "spit and image." **Here is just one explanation**. |

Please let me know if this information is useful!

*Gabby*

**Footnotes:**

* The term "dog-eat-dog" reminds me of a favorite line that I recall from the 1980s sitcom, **Cheers**: Woody asked Norm, "How's it going, Mr. Peterson?" Norm's reply: "It's a dog-eat-dog world, Woody,

and I'm wearing Milk Bone underwear."

** An example of irony: The government decided to put "Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics" labels on music albums to prevent impressionable children from buying certain music. The result was that children became more inclined to buy the black-labeled albums because of it. The action taken had opposite results and shows human folly. That is irony. Oh, and speaking of music... for you fans of **Alanis Morrissette**: most of the things she lists in her song **Ironic** are *not* ironic; they're just bummers. ("Meeting the man of your dreams, and then meeting his beautiful wife." Sigh...)

*** I've actually attempted to defend the term "could care less" a number of times. This quote I found in an article called "World Wide Words" (on the worldwide web) explains it best:

There's a close link between the stress pattern of *I could care less* and the kind that appears in certain sarcastic or self-deprecatory phrases that are associated with the Yiddish heritage and (especially) New York Jewish speech. Perhaps the best known is *I should be so lucky!,* in which the real sense is often "I have no hope of being so lucky," a closely similar stress pattern with the same sarcastic inversion of meaning. There's no evidence to suggest that *I could care less* came directly from the Yiddish, but the similarity is suggestive. There are other American expressions that have a similar sarcastic inversion of apparent sense, such as *Tell me about it!*, which usually means, "Don't tell me about it, because I know all about it already." These may come from similar sources.

**APPENDIX:**

**Your Homework -- What Not to Say:**

Thanks to a couple of alert readers, I can supply you with one excellent internal resource. It is ***Common Errors in English***, by Paul Brians.

For the rest of the resources, I know that some of you have Internet accounts here at work; the rest can bring the list home. Sorry about the long URLs, but they're worth all the typing!

| **Title of Article** | **Internet URL** |
|---|---|
| 44 Everyday Phrases You Might Not Know You've Been Saying Incorrectly | http://thoughtcatalog.com/nico-lang/2013/08/44-everyday-phrases-you-might-know-youve-been-saying-incorrectly/ |
| 17 Phrases You're Probably Saying Wrong | http://www.sheknows.com/living/articles/1003885/17-phrases-youre-probably-saying-wrong |
| 25 Common Phrases That You're Saying Wrong | http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/25-common-phrases-that-youre-saying-wrong.html |
| 11 Everyday Phrases You Might Be | http://www.businessinsider.com/incorrect-phrases-2013-10 |

| Saying Incorrectly | |
|---|---|
| 24 Things You Might Be Saying Wrong: The Reader's Digest version of all those confusing words and seemingly random rules you missed in English class | http://www.rd.com/advice/24-things-you-might-be-saying-wrong/ |
| Independent Fashion Bloggers: 10 Common Phrases You Might Be Getting Wrong, What They Mean, and How to Get Them Right | http://heartifb.com/2013/05/01/10-surprising-phrases-you-might-be-getting-wrong/ |
| Top 5 Most Commonly Misused Phrases | http://voxy.com/blog/index.php/2012/08/common-misused-phrases/ |
| Words and Phrases Used Incorrectly | http://rebeccaryalsrussell.wordpress.com/2010/05/24/words-and-phrases-used-incorrectly/ |
| 10 Common Sayings You're Probably Saying Wrong | http://people.howstuffworks.com/culture-traditions/tv-and-culture/10-common-sayings-wrong.htm |
| 21 Expressions You're Probably Saying Wrong | http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/21-common-expressions-often-used-incorrectly.html?utm_source=post&utm_medium=morecommonexpressionsoftenusedincorrectly<br>&utm_campaign=innerlink |

(U//[redacted]) Do you have a question for Gabby, the Grammar Geek? Please send it to **DL sidtoday**.

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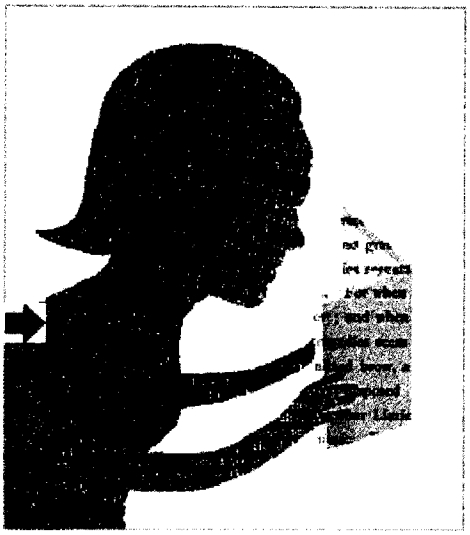
## (U) Grammar Geek Extra: Lots of Letters

FROM: Gabby, the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 05/15/2014

(U) Editor's note: The below column is unclassified in its entirety.



Last month's **Grammar Geek column** certainly resonated with many people we received a LOT of feedback on it! I thought I'd share a few of the comments (in some cases, excerpts) here. I'll still do a regular Grammar Geek column this month -- watch for it in the next few days. Enjoy -- you may even learn a few more things. (I know I did!)

**This One Just Wanted to Say Thanks**

I found this article both interesting and informative. While I have a good amount of intelligence when it comes to technical stuff, my English could stand a good bit of improvement. I expect true for many of my peers.

***From Gabby**: That's true for many (but not all) technical people. We can't all be good at everything! Even I have to look up the rules, especially when I'm writing this column!*

**An Alternate Viewpoint**

While certainly the error is exposed when spelled out (should of), it's easy to drive oneself less crazy in conversation to presume that a speaker is correctly using the homonymic contraction form should've

***Gabby**: I agree with you. In this case, the issue is with the written "should of," "could of," etc. I didn't really distinguish in the article between spoken and written errors, but I wouldn't nitpick on the verbal should of/should've.*

**Helpful Information**

"Irregardless" can be corrected to either "regardless", or "irrespective". Many errors in speech can be recognized as a transition from one correct form to another correct form, in a way that's not consistent from end to end.

***Gabby**: Thanks for writing. I've added "irrespective" to the list of "good" words.*

I share many of the same "hot buttons" you mention. (In fact the article got me all riled up this morning thinking about others!) One of my least favorites is the way writers use the word "**comprise**."

***Gabby**: Here's an example of what this writer meant:*

**Wrong**:

The committee *is comprised of* members from ten different organizations.

**Right**:

The committee *comprises* members from ten different organizations.
The committee *is composed of* members from ten different organizations.

The list is probably too short... One of my pet peeves: Using the word "podium" instead of "lectern." "He stood at the podium to deliver his speech."

***Gabby**: For those who weren't aware, the **podium** is the platform on which to stand, where there is often a **lectern** -- that is, a stand with a slanted top used to support a lecturer's notes, a bible, etc.*

Having run across so many of these in my career, I started keeping a file so I could keep laughing. Here are a few from my files.

- "It was simply a friendly jester." (gesture)
- "Cashed web pages" (cached)
- "A military coupe attempt" (coup) *
- "good stewart of resources" (steward)
- "a nebulas phrase" (nebulous)

* "coupe" is pronounced "coop," while "coup" is pronounced "coo."

I think it appropriate to forthrightly disagree with you on the stance against the figurative use of "literally," if what I have just wiki-confirmed is, in fact, accurate.

To quote from **the Wikipedia entry**:

'In 1769, Frances Brooke's novel The History of Emily Montague was used in the earliest Oxford English Dictionary citation for the figurative sense of "literally"; the sentence from the novel used was, "He is a fortunate man to be introduced to such a party of fine women at his arrival; it is literally to feed among the lilies." [6] This citation was also used in the OED's 2011 revision. [7]'

This may not be a particularly thorough analysis on the matter, but it establishes that there is historical literary precedent for treating the figurative use of "literally" as fair. Or so I figure.

***Gabby**: Sorry, I understand what you're saying, but I still want to discourage everyone from using the word* literally *in anything other than a literal way.*

My personal pet peeve -- Sports analysts who say that a player needs to get "untracked" when they really need to get *on track*. The results of getting untracked is a train wreck.

You can probably blame Judas Priest for a lot of the confusion between thing and think. :-)

**Gabby**: OK, I admit it: I'm certainly old enough, but I'm just not cool enough (or "metal" enough?) to get this comment. I had to google it! It turns out that the band **Judas Priest** had a song called "**You've Got Another Thing Coming**," back in the 80s. (A co-worker of mine did get it, though -- she's so cool!)

**From Gabby**: Many thanks to the people who told me about the internal resource, ***Common Errors in English Usage***, by Paul Brians.

**Three People Couldn't Care Less...Or Could They?**

I like to say this, hoping against hope that it will teach a lesson: I could care less, but not much.

My mother always says "I could care less." Several years ago I asked her why she does that, and she said that when she was a teen (1950s) the phrase was "I could care less, but I don't know how." And after a while they all knew the full phrase so they just said the first half (implying the second half).

New Yorkers (like me) have always said: "Like I could care less" (which should be "As if I could care less", which became shortened to "I could care less".

**Spitting Image/Spit and Image**

This phrase was by far the most controversial of the ones I shared. There isn't room for all of the comments; suffice it to say that "spitting image" is now acceptable, along with "spit and image." If you'd like to see letters related to this topic, check out the footnote.**

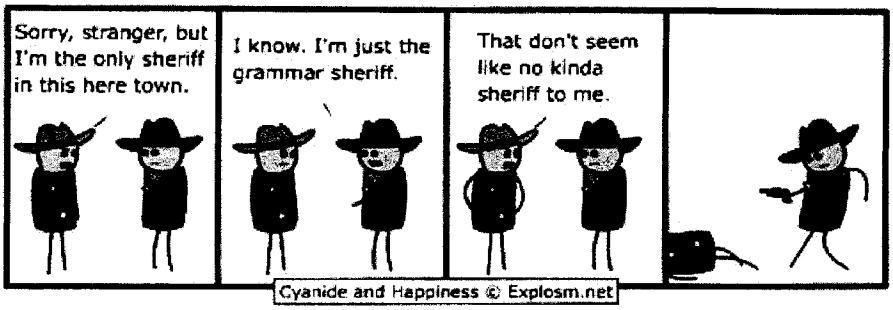
**Things That Made Me Laugh**

It was a very good article, and I'm a figurative (not literal) nit-picker.

I knew most of these. Nothing better than a column that literally confirms my brilliance. :-) Regardless, I was surprised the first time I saw "for all intents and purposes" in writing and realized

I'd been saying it wrong. I should of known better. :-)

And finally, a comic that one of our readers keeps by her desk:




*Gabby*

**Footnotes:**

** Feedback received regarding Spitting Image/Spit and Image:

As far as I know: "Spit and Image" is a shortened form of "Spirit and Image," its origin in Ireland (maybe).

There was a British satire puppet show called the Spitting Image, so I'd guess this error is fairly common. The Brits, for crying out loud, should know better.

Regarding "the spit and image" (which is news to me, incidentally, I thought "spitting"), you say: "The original phrase, 'spit and image,' comes from the Bible, where God made Adam out of 'spit and mud' in order to make him in his own image. God didn't spit on him, as the misstated idiom seems to suggest.

I challenge you to find any reference to "spit" in the account of the creation of Adam in any version of the Bible. In the Bibles I've read, God creates man from just the "dust of the ground" with no spit mentioned. To say it "comes from the Bible" is in error. If you were to say it's "very loosely" based on an account from the Bible, that would seem more accurate.

I enjoyed this month's column greatly, but I do take issue with your etymology of "spitting image". While all sources I could find traced the origin to 19th century spoken (American) English, they disagree on the exact form and origin. All evidence suggests that "spitting image" is perfectly valid, though. Using the Google Books ngram viewer, the earliest published use of either is in the mid 19th century, and "spitting image" is nearly ten times as frequent. Around the turn of the (20th) century, "spit and image" overtook "spitting image". From 1940-1960, the two phrases were used about equally. After 1960, though, "spitting image" skyrocketed while "spit and image" declined. If 150 years of (published!) usage doesn't allow us to claim "spitting image" as at least as valid as "spit and image"--particularly since both are idiomatic and non-compositional phrases anyway--I'm not sure what would!

The *American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms* has an entry for "spitting image":

A precise resemblance, especially in closely related persons. For example, Dirk is the spitting image of his grandfather. This idiom alludes to the earlier use of the noun spit for "likeness," in turn probably derived from an old proverb, "as like as one as if he had been spit out of his mouth" (c. 1400). The current idion dates from about 1900.

(U//[redacted]) Do you have a question for Gabby, the Grammar Geek? Please send it to **DL sidtoday**.

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# (U) The Grammar Geek: Canceled, Cancelled, Flesh, Flush!

FROM: Gabby, the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 05/19/2014

(U) Editor's note: The below column is unclassified in its entirety.

**Have I Been Canceled?**

***Dear Grammar Geek,***

I have a question regarding the proper spelling of the word *Canceled*. I know both are acceptable according to MS Word spell check, but I always thought that there should be one L, but most people seem to use 2. I looked it up in the dictionary on my desk (Yes, I still have one), and it uses one L, but notes that the two L variety is chiefly British. Why does it seem that I am the only one using 1 L, and does it really matter?

--Canceled Out

Dear Can,

The short answer is: it doesn't really matter. But you are correct that American English leans toward one "L" while the Brits, Canadians, and Aussies favor two.

Now for the long answer: Noah Webster is usually credited with removing letters (like the "u" in colour and flavour) to make shorter American versions of words, and *canceled* is the recommended spelling in his 1898 dictionary. However, it isn't a rule, and according to a nifty little graph I found called an Ngram,* we Yanks only started to favor the one "L" spelling in the 1980s. So we can't be too bossy about this rule that isn't a rule.

This "non-rule" also applies to:

- *Canceled* and *Cancelled*
- *Canceling* and *Cancelling*
- *Cancelers* and *Cancellers*
- *Cancelable* and *Cancellable*

But NOT to:

- *Cancellation* -- which is always spelled with two L's, although MS Word allowed me to write it with only one L.
- And of course, *Cancel* is never written with two L's.

***Flush This!***

***Dear Gabby,***

*The phrase "Flesh this out" makes sense to me- someone has created a "skeleton" idea and additional work is needed to make it more complete (i.e. add "flesh" to the bones). However, I often hear "Flush this out," which makes me cringe a bit. Without going into graphic detail :) on that one, one connotation would be "to get rid of it"; another would be a hunting or crime fighting analogy where you try and cause something that is hidden to move in a direction that allows you to then capture it.*

*In our environment, I would believe that "fleshing" something out is more likely than "flushing"*

*something out. Unless these ideas and suggestions are hidden deeply and need to be more broadly exposed, which I suppose is possible, or the intent is to get rid of the idea, which I suppose is also possible, in general that is not the context in which I see these phrases used. Thus I believe many people are using this phrase incorrectly but I would like your take.*

-- Feeling Flushed

Dear Flushed,

You are correct. In fact, when I went searching for a good example, I found something that sounded a lot like what you wrote. This explanation came from Merriam-Webster online:

Think of fleshing out a skeleton. To flesh out something is to give it substance, or to make it fuller or more nearly complete. To flush out something is to cause it to leave a hiding place, e.g., "The birds were flushed out of the tree." It can also be used figuratively, as in "flush out the truth."

*Gabby*

**Footnote:**

* Here's the Ngram. Click on the image for a larger view.

The words are fuzzy, but I verified that "canceled" is the blue one that starts low and ends higher, and "cancelled" is the other one, in red.

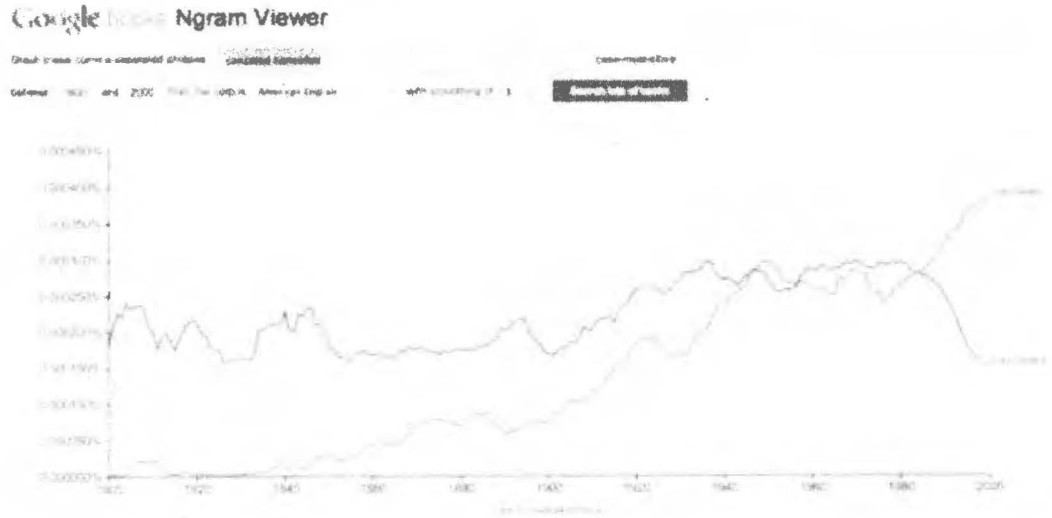


Photo courtesy of Shutterstock.

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# (U) The Grammar Geek: Farther or Further? In or Within?

FROM: Gabby, the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 06/13/2014

(U) Editor's note: The below column is unclassified in its entirety.

### Further Work Needed

***Dear Gabby,***

I have a "friend" who likes to correct everyone about everything. (Fortunately, I don't work with her.) Her most recent "correction" came when I used the word "further" -- or maybe I said "farther" -- and she interrupted me by blurting out the other word. I'm never sure about those two words anyway. Can you help me to know which word to use when, so that I can be ready for her next time?

-- Far From Sure

Dear Far,

I should be able to keep this simple. First, the basic difference:

**Farther** refers to length or distance. Think of the word **far**; it refers to *physical distance*.

**Further** means "to a greater degree," "additional," or "additionally." It refers to *intangible distance*, for measuring *time* or *amount*.

Examples:

Connecticut is *farther* north than Maryland. (It refers to *distance*.)

This topic requires *further* investigation. (Meaning "additional," it refers to *amount*.)

According to my timetable, we should be *further* along. (It refers to *time*.)

Be aware:

Only **further** may be used as a verb, as in, "His studies will *further* his career."

Only **further** is employed as a modifier, as in "We can begin the task now. *Further*, if we stay late, we may complete it today." *Furthermore* is a variant.

**Some sources disagree** that a distinction should be made, but no one can tell you you're using the words incorrectly if you follow this guide.

The bottom line:

If you're referring to physical distance, use **farther**. For everything else, use **further**.

### Confusion Within NSA

***Dear Grammar Geek,***

Is there a difference between using the word "within" and "in"? Until working at this agency, I have never heard the word "within" used so frequently.

For example,

"The folder is located within the filing cabinet"--this just sounds silly!

I would not say "my love comes from in."

Why is it ok to replace "in" with "within" when we would not do it the other way around?

Please tell me there is a rule for this!!

Sincerely,

-- Troubled From In

Dear Troubled,

"In" almost always refers to being inside with finality; "within" usually requires parameters to be accurate.

Generally, "within" is equivalent to "inside," though it tends to suggest being deeper, and has a subtle meaning of being "inside the boundaries or limits."

"Within" can't mean "into." You can say, "Go jump in the lake." That would mean jump into the lake, maybe from a dock or a boat. If you tell me, "Go jump within the lake," I would have to walk into the lake and start jumping.

Some other examples:

- Elvis is in the building. (This means that Elvis is somewhere in the building. You haven't specified where, but he is on the inside.)

Billy is within fifty yards of the building. (He's Elvis's biggest fan and can't wait to see him!)

Bobby is not within one hundred yards of the building. (He's Elvis's stalker and isn't allowed to get any closer.)

- Joe arrived in two hours. (At the end of two hours, he arrived.)

Jerry arrived within two hours. (He arrived at some point during the two hours after he started.)

- Marvin finished the job in five days. (It took him five days to do it.)

Melvin finished the job within five days. (He didn't go over; he may have completed the work in two days.)

Saying that the folder is located *within* the file cabinet isn't grammatically incorrect -- you may have meant to say that the folder can be found somewhere within the boundaries of the cabinet -- but it's more likely that you just want to say that the folder can be found in the file cabinet.

So if someone does write oddly like that, I say go easy on them. It doesn't mean that they're "the enemy in" ... er, I mean "the enemy within"!

*Gabby*

(U//[redacted]) Do you have a question for Gabby, the Grammar Geek? Please send it to **DL sidtoday**.

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## (U) The Grammar Geek -- Fewer than Impressed

FROM: "Gigi" the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 11/13/2012

(U) The entire article below is unclassified .

*Dear Grammar Geek,*

*Is there an official rule about when to use "fewer" and when to use "less"? It seems like the word "fewer" is fewer often misused than the word "less." Not many people are bothered by the "10 items or less" line at the grocery store.*

*Thank you,*

*Fewer than Impressed*

Dear Fewer than Impressed,

Love your moniker -- it really makes the point.

Yes, there are official rules about when to use "fewer" and "less."

"Less" refers to degree or amount and is used with singular nouns. "Fewer" refers to number and is used with plural nouns.

Here's an example to remember:
Today there is **less land** ("less" + singular noun) that is undeveloped, so there are **fewer farms** ("fewer" + plural noun).
If you remember this example (the two l's and the two f's), you'll be right most of the time.

Why not ***all*** the time? Ah! You forgot about the almost-always-present exceptions!

The expression "less than" (rather than "fewer than") precedes ***plural*** nouns referring to periods of time, amounts of money, and quantities.*

- less than ten years ago
- less than 5 ounces
- less than $50,000

Now, what about your example -- "10 items or less"? Is that right? According to some sources, it is.

The expression "or less" (rather than fewer) is used after a reference to a number of items.*

- 100 words or less
- 10 items or less

Other references vehemently disagree and insist it should be "10 items or fewer." So which is right? Well, it depends on which language camp you're in. If you believe a rule is a rule, you probably prefer the more formal "or fewer." If you believe that language is evolving, you'll probably opt for the more colloquial "10 items or less."

Wouldn't you think a grammar column would involve ***less*** controversy with ***fewer*** disagreements?

Notes:

* Exceptions from The Gregg Reference Manual (Eighth Edition)

*(U) Editor's comment: Have a question for the Grammar Geek? Send it in using the "comments/suggestions about this article" button below right.*

## (U) The Grammar Geek -- Should One Capitalize Bare Titles?

FROM: the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 04/10/2012

(U) Today SID*today* rolls out its new column -- The Grammar Geek! This is a write-in column in which SID*today* readers ask for grammatical advice and our expert "geek" provides guidance.

(U//FOUO) The Grammar Geek columnist is Antoinette "Toni" Punzavitz. Toni's credentials are as follows:

- minored in English in college
- taught Language Arts in high school
- private-sector experience as a Director of Communications and a proposal writer
- grant writer for Charles County Public Schools
- several positions at NSA, including editor for the Inspector General and speechwriter for DIRNSA

(U) This column will address general questions of English usage, not specifically rules related to SIGINT reporting (reporters, see **The Reporting Page** for guidance.)

(U) Here is our first question and response. The entire column below is unclassified:

Dear Grammar Geek,
Please bring peace back to my office. I've been arguing with a co-worker about whether to capitalize job titles when no name is given. I believe that one should always capitalize them, such as "The Director likes to play golf" or "The Branch Chief went to get a sandwich." He says you are only supposed to use capital letters when you give the person's name, like "Division Chief Ivanov just came back from a trip to Belgium." Who's right?"
-- Capital Letter Curt

Dear CL Curt,

You can declare a truce because ***you are both right.*** While the general rule is not to capitalize titles where they replace a personal name, *The Gregg Reference Manual* (my personal favorite) adds "However, these titles are sometimes capitalized in writing for a limited readership, where the intended reader would consider the official to be of high rank."

So in your example, I would say that you are right with the capital letter for the Director, but not for the branch chief (unless you are really angling for a promotion).

You might ask how will I know if a person is of "high rank"? While you won't find the answer in any reference manual, I would suggest using numbers as a guide. For example, if there is only one person who holds that title, like Inspector General, go ahead and capitalize it for Agency use. If many people have the title (e.g., branch chief), keep it lower case. The important thing is to be consistent throughout the document.

However, ***while some rules are hard and firm*** *(e.g., give the book to Jack and me)*, ***others are more a matter of style. Your question falls into that category.***

***You and your colleague will find plenty of examples of official writing that will support both your positions.*** The Grammar Geek believes that this is a fine point in grammar usage and should not

cause a rift between two careful writers. However, a mistake like using the wrong "its" or "there" is a whole different story!

--The Grammar Geek

(U) Editor's note: Have a question for the Grammar Geek? To submit your question, click on the "Comments/suggestions about this article" link below, then type your question in box #2 and click "submit comments."

## (U) The Grammar Geek -- Should I Use "a" or "an" with A-bbreviations?

FROM: "Gigi" the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 05/09/2012

Dear Grammar Geek,

(U) My office uses a template for MOUs. I am new to the office, and it others me that the title of the template contains a reference to "*a* SA/CSS SIGINT representative." I say it should be "*an* NSA/CSS SIGINT presentative," because the letter "N" sounds like "en" which begins with vowel. My boss wholeheartedly (and honestly) disagrees with me. I ave found an actual rule for this online by Googling "a vs an," but the oss won't even entertain the possibility that she could be wrong. ssuming that nobody actually thinks "A National Security gency/Central Security Service SIGINT representative," should we be using "a" or "an" before "NSA/CSS"? Also, would this be a hard and fast rule or would it be more a matter of style? Others in my office have urged me to pick my battles and let this go. I have been trying to do just that, but when I saw your article this morning, I considered it an opportunity to get an answer from an expert. Thank you!

b N re a h b A A

-- New to the Office

(U) Dear New to the Office,

(U) I have good news and bad news for you. The good news is you are correct. As my favorite reference book, the Gregg Reference Manual,* states: In choosing *a* or *an*, consider the sound (not the spelling) of the following word; for example, *an* NBC news report or *an* M.B.A. degree.

(U) The test is how people say or read such abbreviations. As you said, because most people would not think "A National Security Agency/Central Security Service SIGINT representative," *an* NSA/CSS SIGINT representative is right. On the other hand, "N.Y.Times" is instantly translated by the mind as "New York Times"; it would not be read as "En Wye Times." Therefore "*a* N.Y. Times spokesperson" is proper. It is tricky, isn't it?

(U) Another thing to consider is whether the group of letters is an abbreviation or an acronym. Contrary to what you frequently hear, the word acronym is not a synonym for abbreviation. An acronym is an abbreviation that is read out like a word, such as NASA or NATO. So while *an* NSA spokesperson is correct, so is *a* NASA spacecraft. Again, ***rely on your ear, not your eye.*** Keeping that simple rule in mind should make it easier to make the right choice.

(U) So what is the bad news? The bad news is you are correct. Now you are faced with the dilemma of how or if to tell your boss. I suggest you don't start the sentence with "I told you so," which I know you wouldn't do. Beyond that, I should offer no advice, as I am trespassing into Zelda's territory.

-- Gigi

(U) Notes:

* (U) The GPO Style Manual concurs: When a group of initials begins with a, e, f, h, I, l, m, n, o, r, s, or x, each having a vowel sound, the indefinite article an is used.

*(U) Editor's note: Have a question for the Grammar Geek? To submit your question, click on the "Comments/suggestions about this article" link below, then type your question in box #2 and click "submit comments."*

## (U) The Grammar Geek -- Yinz Talk Funny

FROM: "Gigi" the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 07/10/2012

(U) Intro: In this month's column, Gigi responds to two questioners with a similar inquiry. The answer to both was not found in a grammar book or a style manual, but in an atlas. The entire column below is unclassified.

Dear Grammar Geek,

Whatever happened to those two little words in the English language... to be? Every time I hear those words omitted I die a little inside. I don't know how people can say things like "That report needs written" or "The safe needs locked" or "The room needs secured." I always thought it should be "That report needs TO BE written" and "The safe needs TO BE locked" and "The room needs TO BE secured." This dead horse doesn't need beaten (yes, I did that on purpose), but I'd love to know if once upon a time someone answered the question... "To be or not to be" and decided that not "to be" is the way to go and it is somehow now acceptable to omit it.

Thank you,

-- Needs satisfied.

Dear Unsatisfied,

Are you hanging around with Steelers and Eagles (pronounced STILLERS and IGGLES) fans?

Dropping the infinitive "to be" is an example of regionalism, most commonly heard in central and northwestern Pennsylvania. (I had a friend from Johnstown, who would say, "The floor needs washed" and warn you later to be careful as it might be "slippy.")

Regionalisms are fun to explore, but they are not Standard English. I don't think any resource book, even in Pennsylvania, would sanction this deviation.

-- Gigi

Dear Grammar Geek,

My friend and I have a question about using words like "burnt" over "burned." She has no problem using either version of the word. I personally dislike "burnt" and other words where "t" is used in place of "ed," but I see it a lot on the internet and have occasionally heard it spoken. Some internet searching indicates that they're both considered correct. Could the usage possibly be regional?

-- "Burnt" After Reading

Dear Burnt,

Gigi thinks that this is an example of affectation, rather than regionalism. It is similar to the use of "whilst" and "amongst" in an otherwise all-American document.

"Burned" and "burnt" are both the past tense of the verb burn, but "burned" is used most often in American and Canadian English. "Burnt" is preferred in British English.

But please note -- when used as an adjective, "burnt" is the right choice for English speakers on both sides of "The Pond." For example, the baby carriage and the perambulator were both burnt orange.

-- Gigi

*(U) Editor's note: Have a question for the Grammar Geek? To submit your question, click on the "Comments/suggestions about this article" link below right, then type your question in box #2 and click "submit comments."*

## (U) The Grammar Geek -- Can Pronouns Be Sexist?

FROM: "Gigi" the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 06/12/2012

(U) The column below is unclassified in its entirety.

Dear Grammar Geek,

What is the correct choice of a pronoun when the gender of the referred singular noun is unknown? One commonly sees a plural used, as in "The judge is required to disclose any conflict of interest they may have."

We don't know if the judge is male or female, so the choice of "he" or "she" is unclear. Also, the neutral "it" seems inappropriate. So, what is the correct pronoun?

-- Seeker of the Right Pronoun

Dear Seeker,

Many years ago when I was in grade school, this wasn't a problem -- if the gender of the antecedent was unknown, one just deferred to the masculine. So, the answer to your question would be "The judge is required to disclose any conflict of interest **he** may have."

As the Women's Movement grew, automatically using the masculine pronoun was viewed as sexist. The answer would then be, "The judge is required to disclose any conflict of interest he or she may have."

Or worse still, the mercifully short-lived attempt to make a hybrid pronoun, i.e., "The judge is required to disclose any conflict of interest s/he may have."

In time, using both pronouns or the hybrid version seemed awkward and stilted, and the preferred approach was to make all nouns plural, when possible. "**Judges** are required to disclose any conflicts of interest **they** may have." **This is the solution I recommend.**

I was further prepared to tell you that your solution ("The judge is required to disclose any conflict of interest they may have.") was incorrect because pronouns agree with their antecedents in gender **and** number.

Checking my usual book references, I felt very good about that answer.

Then I made a tragic mistake; I decided to look online. Lo and behold, I found a source that said it is becoming "increasingly common in current English and widely accepted in speech and writing" to use a plural pronoun with a singular antecedent. Gigi was shocked! This reference went on to say that this is "the solution everyone loves to hate" and a purist (like Gigi) might deem you "careless or ignorant."

More research revealed that the generic "they" was actually used by such notables as Chaucer, Austen, and even Shakespeare, but was banned in the 18th century in an attempt to have English grammar conform to Latin paradigms. And so the generic or indefinite "they" lay dormant for a few centuries until it was handily resurrected to solve the equality dilemma.

That being said, I guess, dear questioner, your example is right -- in some circles. But there will always be sticklers like me who will regard this solution as akin to the sound of fingernails on a blackboard.

-- Gigi

*(U) Editor's note: Have a question for the Grammar Geek? To submit your question, click on the "Comments/suggestions about this article" link below, then type your question in box #2 and click "submit comments."*

## (U) The Grammar Geek -- High on Hyphens

FROM:

Run Date: 09/20/2012

(U) The entire article below is unclassified.

Dear "Gigi,"

I have a question on hyphens. I was always taught that in an example such as the following, it should be hyphenated:

"There are many high-priority signals."

However, another editor says there is no need for the hyphen because it is "understood" as suggested in 6.16 GPO Style Manual.* But I feel that when it's not hyphenated, you're saying that the signals are high AND priority. But really, "high" describes the type of priority it is. Can you clarify?

-- High Time for a Hyphen?

Dear High Time,

Ah! The poor hyphen -- misunderstood and misused!

Although there are several uses for a hyphen, let's just tackle its use in compound words, like your example.

Sometimes you want to write a common word combination, but you aren't sure whether it should be written as hyphenated or as stand-alone words... We all know that feeling! Hmm... which is it, hyphenated or not?? **In such cases, the only way you can tell for sure is to look it up in the dictionary.** When you do look it up, sometimes the results seem rather arbitrary. For example, why do we have "cross-purpose" (hyphenated), but also "cross hairs" (stand-alone words)? Well, because the dictionary says so!

Now what if you can't find the word combination you have in mind anywhere in the dictionary? I looked it up, and one expert said that in such cases you always hyphenate it, while another expert said the exact opposite. So, do whatever you like -- you can't go wrong.

Now wait, **we're not quite done yet.** There are times when you really should use a hyphen, and (sorry to say) the dictionary will be of no use to you at all in figuring it out. What am I talking about? **Here's a rule: If it will make the sentence clearer to insert a hyphen between words, then do so.** That's when the hyphen will clear up any possible ambiguity in your sentence. You can do this ***whenever*** you think it's necessary. You make the call.

The sentence you submitted is a great example of this. If you go to the dictionary and look up "high-priority," you'll find nothing, because it's not a standard word pair, a la "cross-purpose" or "man-eating" or hundreds of others... But you are still right to use the hyphen, because the hyphen tells the reader that "high" is tied to the word "priority" in this sentence, and ***only*** that word. The hyphen makes it clear.

Have you ever noticed that the full expansion of "NGA" has a hyphen in it? The name of the agency is National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency. Why did they insert a hyphen between the words "geospatial" and "intelligence"? Surely they didn't find that pairing in the dictionary anywhere... They did it to show that "geospatial" applies only to the word "intelligence" and not to the word "agency." (Without the hyphen, readers might think in puzzlement, "NGA is an intelligence agency that is somewhere on planet Earth???")

Sometimes you need ***more than one*** hyphen to group words together for clarity. For example, you might say, "The commander-in-chief speech comes at the end of the program," or "The state-of-the-art engine under the hood makes this car zoom like a rocket."

Here's a fun example from "The Careful Writer" that illustrates how important it is to have the right number of hyphens: "They have enabled the five-inch gun crew to iron out the kinks in its fire-control system." One more hyphen (five-inch-gun crew) is needed to make that crew man-size.

So be kind to the hyphen, and use it gently. Don't sprinkle them through your prose haphazardly, but use them to make sure that you are conveying the right message.

(U) Note:

* (U) The "Government Printing Office Style Manual" 6.16 says: "Where meaning is clear and readability is not aided, it is not necessary to use a hyphen to form a temporary or made compound. Restraint should be exercised in forming unnecessary combinations of words used in normal sequence."

*(U) Have a question for the Grammar Geek? Send it in using the "comments/suggestions about this article" button below right.*

## (U) The Grammar Geek -- How a Conjunction Can Cost You Money, Plus "Ensuring" You Are Not Embarrassed

FROM: "Gigi" the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 10/11/2012

(U) The entire article below is unclassified.

*Dear "Gigi,"*

*Can you talk about the word "however"? In most cases, it's used at the eginning of a sentence, but sometimes, I've seen it used in the middle f a sentence. When is it okay to use "however" in the middle of a entence, or is that a no-no?*

Dear Curious Contrastor,

*However* is used anywhere in the sentence where it best emphasizes a ontrast -- ***anywhere.*** In the olden days, the rule was not to start a entence with *however*, but those days have gone the way of the horse and buggy.

Your question provokes another explanation, however, and that is how one ***punctuates*** a sentence that includes the word *however*. And as usual, the answer is -- it depends.

Let's consider the following:

**Example A:** I told my sister I would have dinner with her; however, I did not say I would pay the bill.

Adding the word *however* between those two thoughts sets up a nice contrast. But why use the semi-colon and the comma? The answer is to separate the two complete thoughts in this compound sentence. "I told my sister that I would have dinner with her" is one complete thought. "I did not say I would pay the bill" is another complete thought. So, if you can make two perfectly good English sentences from one compound sentence, use the "; however," construct.

**Example B:** I told my sister, however, that I would not pay the bill.

What's going on here? The transitional and non-essential word *however* is separated from the rest of the sentence by ***commas.*** Why? Read the sentence without the word *however* and you have ***one*** complete thought.

**Example C:** However, when the check came, I paid.

This one's easy. When *however* begins the sentence and is non-essential, use a comma to separate it from the rest of the sentence.

**Warning! Do not proceed if you are already on *however* overload.**

**Example D:** However you look at it, my sister got a free meal.

In this sentence, there is no punctuation mark after *however* because the word *however* is essential to the meaning of the sentence. If you take out the word, you're left with gobbledygook.

*Dear Gigi,*

*I am embarrassed to say this, but I still get a little confused about when to use "ensure" and "insure." Can you clarify for me, so that in the future I ensure/insure that I get it right!*

Dear "En-certain":

No need to be embarrassed. I think I can assure you that you will never have trouble with this question again.

You **assure a person** -- as in the above sentence.

You **insure something** -- She insured the necklace for $1,000.

You **ensure an outcome** -- Please ensure that the task is completed.

From my experience here at NSA, I would guess that *ensure* is the verb from this selection most often used in our writing... In fact, I'm "sure" of it!

(U) Editor's comment: Have a question for the Grammar Geek? Send it in using the "comments/suggestions about this article" button below right.

# (U) The Grammar Geek: Each Other vs. One Another, That vs. Which, and "Word Crimes"

FROM: Gabby, the Grammar Geek

Run Date: 07/28/2014

(U) Editor's note: The below column is unclassified in its entirety.

Hello, dear readers, and happy summer to all of you! I'm taking a short break for the summer, so this column is going to be my July/August issue. I'll see you in September!

**Each Other or One Another? What's the Difference?**

***Dear Gabby,***

What is the difference between "each other" and "one another"? They don't seem to have different meanings to me, but I'm afraid I just don't get it. Please help me to make sense of this!

-- Love Each One Another

***Dear Love,***

This topic has been a source of confusion and frustration for me, too. You'll be glad to know that some writers don't acknowledge a difference between the two phrases, so if someone tries to correct you, you can always claim to belong to the no-difference school of thought. I will give you the rules, though, since they are followed by many writers.

The distinction between these two *reciprocal pronouns* is that "each other" should be used with two people or things, and "one another" should be used with more than two.

*The three presenters argued with one another over who should announce the winner, but Babs and Mandy gave each other gifts after the ceremony.*

When referring to an indefinite number, either term can be used: *We love each other. We love one another.*

For the possessive form of either, by the way, it's always *each other's* and *one another's*. Never end with the apostrophe after the s.

As I mentioned, not everyone gives a hoot about this rule, so you'll be in good company if you forget it. There is one other distinction, though, that I see as a wee bit more important: When speaking of an ordered series of events or stages, *one another* is the preferred form. For example:

*The waiters followed one another into the dining room.*

In my mind, I'm seeing a line of waiters, trays held high, entering the room in a line.

*The waiters followed each other into the dining room.*

Depending on the context, this may be easy enough to understand, but I'm picturing two waiters here, or possibly a few pairs of waiters.

You may not be seeing what I'm seeing, but *one another* is the preference in this case.

**That or Which...and What About Who?**

***Hello, Grammar Geek,***

I would appreciate guidance about using "which" or "that" in my writing. I sometimes wonder if I've used these words correctly, especially when I read over documents I've drafted.

I'm providing two sentences below which stump me. Are both sentences correct? If "which" and "that" are not interchangeable, would you provide some examples?

MIT is a university which is located in the United States.
MIT is a university that is located in the United States.

-- Which is That?

***Dear Which,***

There is a subtle but important difference between the use of ***that*** and ***which*** in a sentence. The key factor is whether the information you're including in the sentence is ***restrictive*** or ***non-restrictive***.

- A **restrictive** clause is **necessary to the sentence**. For these, we use ***that***. If the meaning of the sentence would be lost without the information, it is most likely restrictive.
- A non-restrictive clause is **helpful but non-essential**. For these we use ***which*** -- *always with commas to set the information apart*. Visually, with the use of the commas, you can see that the information is parenthetical; think of it as a bonus to the basic information of the sentence.

Based on what I think you're trying to say in your example above, the correct sentence choice is the second one: MIT is a university that is located in the United States. (If "which" had been correct, it would need a comma before "which.") That's not the best example for illustrating the difference though, so here are a few more:

**Example 1 (From Your Note)**

This is the error I see people making most frequently. The restrictive information in this sentence means you should use *that* in place of *which*.

*I'm providing two sentences below which stump me.*

Being stumped is crucial to the meaning of the sentence, so the sentence should read:

*I'm providing two sentences below **that** stump me.*

To keep this article short and sweet, I've included the rest of my examples in the *Footnotes Section*.*

I hope I've made it clear that *that* and *which* are NOT interchangeable. If you're restricting or narrowing information, use ***that***. If the information is additional to the sentence -- no matter how interesting or useful -- it's non-restrictive, so use ***which***.

**But What About Who?**

(Why do I have the feeling that this is about to turn into an **Abbott and Costello routine**?)

*Who* is used when you're talking about people. It's a little easier with *who* because you don't have two different words, since you use it in place of both *that* and *which*, but you still need to remember when to use the **commas**. Use the commas to set the *non-restrictive (additional, bonus)* information apart. Here are just a few more examples:

- *Could the person who left the note on my desk please come and see me?*
  **Restrictive:** You need "who left the note on my desk" in this sentence, or the readers won't know who is supposed to come and see you.
- *The system administrator who had a deep voice was very helpful.*
  **Restrictive:** You need "who had a deep voice" in the sentence, or you'll be asked which system administrator you mean.
- *My boss, who is off today, is named Sherry.*
  **Non-restrictive:** "My boss is named Sherry" can stand alone.
- *Rich, who is also known as Ricardo, is an excellent writer.*
  **Non-restrictive:** "Rich is an excellent writer" can stand alone.
- *People who arrive early can park in the main lot.*
  **Restrictive:** Which people can park in the main lot? The ones who arrive early.

**Word Crimes -- These Lines Aren't Blurred**

I can't sign off without sharing this gem! Have you heard **"Weird Al" Yankovic's** latest tune? It's called "Word Crimes" (sung to the tune of **Robin Thicke's** hit song, "**Blurred Lines**"), and you can find it easily on the Internet. In less than four minutes' time, he manages to squeeze in more advice than I've given you in the past year! (Well, he did give some of the *same* advice.) Check it out when you get a chance!

***Word Crimes* Update:** If you have Intelink access, you can view and hear Weird Al's *Word Crimes* right now! Here's a **link to "Weird Al is a Grammar Geek!"** on Intelink.

***Word Crimes* Update to the Update**: Whether you have Intelink access or not, I've now procured the lyrics to *Word Crimes*! **

Enjoy the rest of the summer!

*Gabby*

**Footnotes:**

* Here are some more examples for understanding the difference between that vs. which:

**Example 2 -- Extra Information**

- *Leap years, which have 366 days, contain an extra day in February.*
  This sentence doesn't need "which have 366 days" to make sense. In fact, saying "Leap years that have 366 days..." is kind of silly. No restriction is needed -- there are no leap years that don't have 366 days.

**Example 3**

- *The cheesecake, which was covered with strawberries, was delicious.*
  There's a cheesecake. I ate it. It was delicious. By the way, in case you're interested, it was covered with strawberries.
- *The cheesecake that was covered with strawberries was delicious.*
  There were a few cheesecakes. I tried the one with all the strawberries and enjoyed it, so I can attest to the deliciousness of it. I don't know about the others.
  *OR...*
  This could also mean that I tried all the cheesecakes (a more likely scenario, actually), and although the others were good, the one with the strawberries was delicious.

**Example 4**

- *The school that is 100 years old is being renovated.*
  This sentence tells us which school is being renovated.
- *The school, which is 100 years old, is being renovated.*
  We're only talking about one school here. This sentence tells us that it is being renovated. The fact that it is 100 years old is good information to help the reader to understand why the school is being renovated, but it's not important to the main point of the sentence.

** The lyrics to *Word Crimes*, thanks to the folks on Intelink who shared:

Everybody shut up!

Everybody listen up!

[Verse 1]

If you can't write in the proper way
If you don't know how to conjugate
Maybe you flunked that class
And maybe now you thought
That people mock you online

[Bridge]
Okay, now here's the deal
I'll try to educate ya
Gonna familiarize
You with the nomenclature
You'll learn the definitions
Of nouns and prepositions
Literacy's your mission
And that's why I think it's a

[Chorus]
Good time
To learn some grammar
Now, did I stammer?
Work on that grammar
You should know when
It's "less" or it's "fewer"
Like people who were
Never raised in a sewer

I hate these word crimes
Like "I could care less"
That means you do care
At least a little
Don't be a moron
You better slow down
And use the right pronoun
Show the world you're no clown

[Verse 2]
Say you got an "It"
Followed by apostrophe, "s"
Now what does that mean?
You would not use this in this case
As a possessive
It's a contraction
What's a contraction?
Well, it's the shortening of a word, or a group of words
By the omission of a sound or letter

[Bridge]
Okay, now here's some notes
Syntax you're always dangling
No X in "Espresso"
Your participle's danglin'
But I don't want your drama
If you really wanna
Leave out that Oxford comma
Just keep in mind
That BCRU

[Chorus]

Are words not letters
Get it together
Use your spellchecker
You should never
Write words using numbers
Unless you're seven
Or your name is Prince

I hate these word crimes
You really need a
Full time proofreader
You dumb mouthbreather
Well, you should hire
Some cunning linguist
To help you distinguish
What is proper English

[Verse 3]
One thing I ask of you
Time to learn your homophones is past due
Learn to diagram a sentence too
Always say to whom
Don't ever say to who
Yeah, listen up when I tell you this
I hope you never use quotation marks for emphasis
If you finished second grade
I hope you can tell
If you're doing good or doing well
Figure out the difference
Irony is not coincidence
And, I thought that you'd gotten it through your skull
What's figurative and what's literal
Oh but, just now, you said
You literally couldn't get out of bed
That really makes me want to literally
Smack a crowbar upside your stupid head

[Chorus]
I read your e-mail
It's quite apparent
Your grammar's errant
You're incoherent
Saw your blog post
It's really fantastic
That was sarcastic (Oh, psych!)
Cause you write like a spastic

I hate these Word Crimes
Your prose is dopey
Think you should only
Write in emoji
Oh, you're a lost cause
Go back to preschool
Get out of the gene pool

Try your best to not drool

[Outro]
Never mind I give up
Really now I give up
Hey, hey, hey
Hey, hey, hey
Go Away!

(U//[redacted] Do you have a question for Gabby, the Grammar Geek? Please send it to **DL sidtoday**.

*(U//[redacted] Looking for older installments of the Grammar Geek column? See **the early columns, written by Gigi**, the original Grammar Geek.*

*(U//[redacted] SIDtoday is a forum for open communications. The views expressed in articles are those of the person(s) or organization listed in the **byline**; they are not necessarily the official, corporate stance of the SIGINT Directorate (messages from SID leadership excluded).*